

Lost in the Dark by Kendra Luehr

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Summary: The year is 1995, and Billy has successfully managed to avoid contact with everyone in Hawkins. But when he gets a frantic call from Eleven, he finds himself drawn back into her strange, fantastical world once more.

1. Drifted

A/N: This is more or less a continuation of "Changing Winds" and "Par for the Course." Those two fics don't need to be read to understand this, but they help to show the progression of El and Billy's relationship. I initially wasn't going to write anymore, but then I got a review on "Par for the Course" that said if El was ever in trouble, Billy would come running right back to help her. And I was like OHNONONONO (yesyesyes) PLOT BUNNY. So here we are! I don't really know what I'm doing, but that's essentially what happens in all of my fanfiction, haha. Also, yes. The title is a Daughter lyric (because Daughter is the best). Hope you all enjoy!

CH 1: Drifted

"Yo, Hargrove! There's some hot lil' number askin' for you on the phone."

Lifting his head, Billy wiped his oily hands onto his jeans and stepped away from the car he'd been fixing. "A girl?" Moving over to his friend and employer, Clay Ross, he frowned and shook his head. "Did she give her name?"

"No, but she says she *needs* you." Clay punctuated this with a suggestive roll of the hips. "She seemed a lil' *desperate*, if ya know what I mean. Whose heart didja break this time?"

"You're an asshole."

Laughing, Clay moved over toward a neighboring car. "An asshole I may be, but *I'm* not the one keeping that girl waiting."

Flipping the bird, Billy headed back toward the phone on the wall and lifted it off its cradle. "Y'lo?"

"Billy..."

All at once, the blood drained from his face and he faltered, his palms growing damp as he gripped at the phone. "El...?"

There came the sound of her soft, hitching breaths as she sniveled.

"It's coming."

"W-what?" Glancing over his shoulder, he caught sight of Craig *yet again* thrusting his hips, so he promptly turned back toward the wall. "What do you need me to do?"

"Can you maybe...come get me?" Her voice was small and childlike, much like she'd sounded all those years ago. "Please, Billy... I don't want to be alone."

Closing his eyes, Billy clenched his jaw and shook his head. A part of him wanted to tell her no – to fucking call someone *else* – but he knew that he could never abandon her. Not when he owed her his life.

"Where are you?"

"My apartment. I, um...my roommate isn't home."

"Alright, well just stay put, okay? I'll get a flight out to Indiana as soon as I can." Grabbing a nearby pen and notepad, he leaned against the wall and tried to steady his hands. "Can you gimme your address?"

Eleven's breath stuttered again, but she was quick to give him the information he needed.

"Alright, got it," he said. "And are you *sure* nobody else can come for you in the meantime? Maybe you can call the stick bug?"

She scoffed, a certain edginess to her voice. "I don't really talk to Mike anymore, Billy. That was ten years ago."

Ah. *Right*. The perfect reminder of just how long he'd managed to distance himself from Hawkins. Or more specifically, from the ties that had turned him into a monster in the first place.

"Billy?"

"Yeah, I'm still here."

Her breathing steadied somewhat, but then she whispered, "Hurry."

The finality of her tone made his heart drop.

Billy hated travel. Anytime he'd undergone a trip, it had always signified a change – sometimes good, but mostly bad, and as he stood in front of Eleven's apartment, he suddenly realized how goddamn surreal his life was. He'd purposely shut her out. After their friendship, he'd intentionally *ignored* her, because relationships were messy, and he'd just wanted a nice, clean break. But this? *This* was messy as all hell, and he knew that whoever was waiting for him was *not* the same bright-eyed, knobby-kneed teen he'd known back in 1985.

The door lurched open then and Billy staggered back, stunned. "Jesus..."

"Billy." Eleven whimpered with relief, then immediately hurled her weight against him as if tackling a linebacker. He grunted at the unexpected weight, but compensated by wrapping his arms around her waist. She responded by clinging to him more tightly.

For a long while, Billy said nothing. His heart pounded in his ears, and he felt disquieted by the fond, persistent nudge of Eleven's cheek into his.

"You came," she whispered, almost as if she didn't believe it. "You're really here."

"Of course I am," he said. "You didn't actually think...?" Trailing off, he rolled his eyes skyward, knowing full-well what she had to have thought. "I almost didn't come," he admitted. "It's not...I-I don't feel right when I'm here."

Gradually loosening her hold on him, Eleven lowered back down to her height and searched him with her large, probing eyes. She was older now – tall and pretty and mature – but one thing hadn't changed, and that was the soft, overly kind look she'd always reserved for him and him alone. It made him feel low and unworthy.

"Do you want to come in?"

Indicating his overnight bag, Billy shrugged. "I guess I'd better. I don't have any hotel reservations."

Beaming, Eleven stepped back to allow him entry, the bounce to her step reminiscent of older times.

Crossing the threshold, Billy took in the sight of pictures – mostly of Joyce and Will and Hopper, but there were a few others he didn't recognize. The shag carpet felt questionably sticky beneath his feet, but otherwise, the apartment was rather cozy, and clearly shared by two girls just scraping by.

"Who's your roommate?" he asked, attempting conversation. "Why didn't you ask Max?"

Brows drawing inward, Eleven folded her arms and shook her head. "Did you not get the invitation? Max and Lucas got married five years ago. I always thought you knew..."

Awkwardly, Billy hunched his shoulders and turned away, pretending to be interested in a picture of Eleven with a beach ball. "I, uh...I never told Maxie where I moved. I thought it'd be easier that way... far less baggage. She deserved a clean break, too."

Eleven's eyes narrowed. "And did you ask *her* that, or did you come to that conclusion on your own? She was devastated when you didn't show up."

Billy huffed. "I never got the invite. I must've moved to Los Angeles by then. I, uh...have a bad habit of being nomadic these days. I'm not really fond of laying down roots."

"So I've noticed."

Frowning, Billy turned to regard her. "You understood my intentions as a kid, so why are you riding my ass about it now?"

Shrugging, Eleven looked down at the floor. "I dunno, I just...I missed you, I guess."

"And the mindflayer? You said it was back?"

Appearing sheepish, she gave a helpless little shrug. "I don't know... maybe, I just...I have a feeling."

"A feeling?" Finally, Billy was angry. "You mean to tell me I came out all this way for a fucking *feeling*?"

"You know how it is!" she spat. "You...y-you've been marked by it too, so you *know* that drowning, suffocating loneliness, and I couldn't *take* it anymore, okay? My roommate helped a lot, but she went off on a trip with her boyfriend, and I just can't...I *can't* do it anymore, Billy! I needed you here. And if that's an inconvenience to you, then I'm sorry."

The harsh lines in Billy's forehead softened and he turned away, grumbling to himself as he re-adjusted the overnight bag on his shoulder. "So where am I sleeping?"

All at once, Eleven's stance mellowed in relief, and her eyes brightened as she folded her hands. "Trisha won't be back for a couple weeks, so you can either take her bed or the couch."

Shrugging, Billy promptly dumped his bag by the old, faded couch, then sank down onto the springy cushions with an approving sigh. "This'll do," he assured her. "All I need is a pillow and a flask." Catching her disapproving look, he chuckled. "I'm only *half*-joking."

Suddenly quiet again, Eleven began twisting her hands, just like she had whenever he'd awoken in the hospital. She appeared almost shy as she moved over and had a seat across from him. "Can I ask you something?"

He shrugged, propping his feet onto the coffee table.

Looking away, Eleven sighed. "Are you happy in California? Like...do you have friends and people who love you?"

Billy's eyes clouded, as they often did whenever faced with sentimentality. "I'm happy enough," he grumbled.

"But...are you happy?"

"Why does it matter?"

"I don't know...I guess it shouldn't, but it does. I want to know that all of this was worth it."

"That all *what* was worth it?"

"Us...our separation." Bottom lip trembling, she tensed her hands in her lap. "It hurt when you never wrote to me, Billy. But as your friend, I knew better than to look for you. I never...I-I never used my powers to find you again. 'Cause ultimately, I wanted you to come back when you were ready." She hesitated. "Are you ready now?"

Billy's face remained a blank slate. He would never, *ever* come back to Hawkins of his own accord, and she had to know that – she *had* to know that he'd done all of this for her.

"Billy?"

"I'm tired," he muttered. "Do me a solid and go to your room or something, maybe? I need a nap."

Expression growing pinched, Eleven nodded and swiftly rose from her seat. "I'll probably make dinner in an hour," she muttered. Hesitating, she offered a gruff, "Also, I like your hair," before irritably storming off to her bedroom. The door closed not long after.

A/N: If you wish to read my **historical/supernatural romance novel**, you can find it on my Tumblr, musicboxmemories!

2. The Return

CH 2: The Return

Shaking and faintly perspiring, Eleven ripped the covers back from her legs and staggered out of bed. Her heart jackhammered between her ribs and with several shallow, quaking breaths, she found herself heading for the safety of the living room. She didn't know why or how, but she believed that only one person could calm her in that moment...

Billy laid sleeping on the couch, mouth open as he snored almost comically.

Trembling, she reached out and touched his arm.

"W-what?!" Billy jerked upright, startled by the looming figure above him. "Jesus, El...you scared me."

"Come sleep in my bed," she commanded.

"Huh?"

"I had a nightmare, so it's either you get into bed with me until I fall asleep, or I lie down on top of you on this tiny couch. And somehow, I have a feeling that we'd both be more comfortable in my bed."

"Uhh..." Blinking the stunned fog from his eyes, Billy rolled up in order to get a better look at her. "You're really serious, aren't you? Damn...what happened? What did you dream about?"

Trembling, she shook her head. "I don't wanna talk about it... Not yet."

"Okay, well you don't expect to be cuddled or some shit, do you?"

Eleven shook her head, keeping her eyes trained on the floor. Wordlessly, she held out her hand, entreating him to take it.

Sighing, Billy grudgingly accepted her outstretched hand, then hefted himself up off the couch. "Lead the way, princess."

She ignored his almost deprecating tone. Clearly, he wasn't appreciative of being woken up. "I'm sorry," she apologized, "it's just...don't you have bad dreams?"

"More often than I can count."

"Then...you understand?"

He squeezed her hand, to which she gratefully squeezed back.

"I have a queen-sized bed," she assured him, "so you'll have plenty of space." Leading him through the dark little room, she drew back the covers and waited for him to slip onto the mattress, her slight frame still trembling as she crawled in alongside him. "God, I can't stop shaking..."

"So I see – ah...*feel*, since it's pitch-black in here."

"Sorry..."

"What are you sorry for? Jesus, El, ever since I got here, it's like you've done nothing but apologize. Shouldn't it be the other way around?" He heard her sigh.

"I *am* sorry, though," she mumbled. "Friends don't lie..."

"Meaning?"

"Oh, um..." Flustered, she chewed her lip and waved her hands. "Well...you know how I said I've never used my powers to look for you?"

"Yeah..."

"Well...I lied."

He laughed. "I knew it. You didn't see anything weird though, did you? Like me naked?"

"What? God, *no!* Gross!"

"Hey!" Laughing, he held up his hands in surrender. "Y'know, you are

the absolute *first* woman to express disgust over my physique."

Eleven pouted. "I'm not like most women."

"Yeah, definitely not... And that's honestly a good thing – or maybe I'm just saying that to ease the sting of my first rejection."

Eleven's eyes widened. "R-rejection?"

"I'm kidding. Relax."

She did, her body melting somewhat into a comfortable, tranquil position as she rolled over onto her side. She gazed at Billy across the pillow, trying to discern his dark profile within the moonlight. "Billy?"

"Hmm?"

"Did you ever want to come back? Even just a little?"

Hesitating, he laid there in thought, his head propped up with his arm as he gazed toward the ceiling. "Not really," he admitted. "I mean, I naturally thought of Max, and...of *you*, but that was never enough. This place is stained."

"Do you mean *you're* stained? Whenever you're here?"

He sighed through his nose, long and deep. "Yeah...guess I am."

Feeling a heaviness in her heart, Eleven thought of how scarred Billy had to be – both physically and emotionally – and she drew her knees in toward her chest. "You're still a hero to me, you know," she whispered. "I'll never forget it...what you did for me, and what you did for my friends. You *saved* us."

Billy swallowed, a tightness forming in the back of his throat. "Stop..."

She shook her head. "I can't, Billy. Thanks to your sacrifice, all of us lived to get degrees and have normal, happy lives...I became a vet, and now I fix and save animals. I wanted to be just like you."

Billy scoffed, shaking his head. "Why would you ever wanna be like me? I'm a fuckup...a car mechanic who can barely hold a relationship, because *fuck*... It's just not my thing, y'know? *People* aren't my thing. That's why I'm so confused over why I tolerate you."

Eleven smiled, hugging her knees more closely to her chest. "I think you like people more than you let on."

"Yeah? Well *I* think you're full of shit, Little Miss Philosophy. Now shut up, alright? You said you'd let me get some sleep, and if I *don't*, I'm going to look like hell in the morning."

Eleven's features suddenly grew somber, her head shaking slowly. "No," she softly mumbled. "I've stared hell right in the face, Billy. That's not what I see when I look at you."

Bewildered, he glanced over at her, squinting at her shape through the dark. "Then what do you see?"

"My friend." She held out her hand for him, and hesitant, Billy waited a beat before pressing his palm into hers.

When Billy awoke the next morning, he felt a string of confusion. Somehow, Eleven had gotten her limbs awkwardly tangled with his, and as he drew further into awareness, he realized that he had a good chunk of her long, wavy hair in his mouth.

Sputtering, he withdrew and wrinkled his brow. "Jesus...*God*, El, you really need to cut your hair."

The lights flickered, dimmed, and then cut off, his body shooting upright to behold the one place he'd sworn he'd never return.

Panicking, he got up off the floor and dizzily spun in a circle, searching the darkened room for his friend. "El?" *Ohgodohgodohgod*. "El?!"

She wasn't there. She wasn't fucking *there*, and he was all alone. He never should've come back...why was he so fucking *stupid*?

"Do you know why you're here?"

Whirling around, Billy beheld himself – a leering, sinister doppelganger that made his heart leap into his throat.

"Fuck off," he hissed. "Fuck off!" He wouldn't allow this to happen – *not again!*

Hurling all his weight toward the doppelganger, Billy wrapped his hands around its throat and squeezed. The version of himself did nothing but grin smugly, causing Billy to scream and squeeze even harder.

"Billy...you're...y-you're hurting me..."

Perplexed, he tilted his head, feeling a chill run up and down his spine. *That voice...*

All at once, Billy found himself rocketing backwards, bright spots of light flashing across his eyes as he connected hard with a thick, unyielding surface. *Eleven's bedroom.*

Gasping for breath, Billy blinked in shock as he gaped back at Eleven, who was trembling on her bed and grasping at her throat, a dark trickle of blood oozing from her nose.

Oh, God. What had he done?

Shaking, Billy glanced behind him at the severely damaged wall. Had that even been *real*? Or had it all been a dream?

"Billy?"

Swallowing, he turned back to regard her. "El... I think we need to call your friends."

Fearfully, she nodded.

INDIVIDUAL THANKS:

Kara: Thank you! It's honestly been difficult to figure out where I'm going with this, so I hope you still think so! lol

Shian1998: Thanks! :) I have a bad habit of always needing to make

things AU at some point, so I guess this was inevitable. Mike and El didn't leave each other on bad terms, even though it seems like it. I'll hopefully get more into that in the next chapter. Thanks so much for the continued support!

Key Boy: Thanks so much for the interest! My intention was to keep it going, but it's just kind of difficult since I don't have any set ending in mind.

3. Reunited

CH 3: Reunited

"They're not going to like that I'm here."

"You have to be," Eleven argued. "You had the same basic dream that I did, so..." She drew a breath. "We're connected – we're *all* connected. And if we don't figure this out, then..."

"I know," Billy mumbled, gazing out the window. "Believe me, you don't need to spell it out."

Folding her arms, Eleven gazed up at the back of his head, feeling a restless ache in her chest. "You didn't hurt me, you know." Billy remained silent, though she spotted a slight tension in his shoulders. "I've had worse."

Billy scoffed. "Yeah, and all at *my* hands when I was that...that *thing*. I can't believe I let it get to me again. It's this place, it's...it's this fucking *town*." He turned back to look at her then, desperate. "You should come with me. Just pack your bags, and we'll run."

Eleven shook her head, sorrowful. "No, Billy. I won't just abandon my friends."

"It's not *abandonment*, it's self-preservation! You can't help anyone if you're dead!"

She balked, startled by the amount of pleading fear she saw gazing back at her. He took hold of her hand and she swallowed, trembling as he earnestly squeezed her fingers. "Billy..."

Knock. Knock. Knock.

Eager to break free, Eleven felt a residual warmth in her cheeks as she opened the door. All at once, she lit up with a joyous smile. "Max! Lucas!"

Squealing, Max drew her in for a hug, her embrace bone-crushingly tight as she practically lifted Eleven off the floor. "God, I missed you!"

Did you get our postcard?"

"The one from Hawaii?"

"Yep, that's the one!"

Once she'd regained her breath, Eleven grinned and moved over to hug Lucas. "Thank you both for coming. I didn't want to say over the phone, but..."

"We get it," Lucas assured her. "Besides, sometimes we like the element of surprise."

Just as these words were spoken, Billy moved in behind Eleven, causing Lucas to stagger back in disbelief. "Okay, what's *this* asshole doing here?"

Max struck his arm. "That *asshole* is my brother!" Eyes far from kind, she marched forward and gave Billy a none-too-gentle shove. "Where the *fuck* have you been?" she seethed. "You couldn't even write to me? Come to my *wedding*?"

Accepting her shoves with numbed shame, Billy finally caught hold of Max's shoulders and drew her in for a tight, fierce embrace. She fought against him, still irate, before ultimately melting into his arms, her soft sobs becoming muffled by the denim of his jacket.

"I'm sorry, Maxie," he whispered. "I was so stupid...I'm *always* so stupid."

Lucas awkwardly lingered behind them, occasionally looking to Eleven for help.

Finally lifting his head, Billy held out an arm toward the stunned young man. "C'mere, you sonofabitch. I owe you some congratulations."

Lucas laughed nervously. "Oh no, that's alright, I – *hey!*" Shooting his arms upward, he jerked in shock when Billy pulled him in for a tight, unyielding embrace and chummily clapped his hand against his back.

"You take care of her, or you're a dead man, got it?"

Max sighed. "Billy..."

"What? He needs to know where he stands."

Everyone laughed (except Lucas).

That was when Will appeared in the doorway, smiling shyly as he looked between them all. "Is this the right place? I almost didn't recognize Lucas with his face crushed against Billy's chest like that."

Promptly shaking Billy off, Lucas irritably straightened his shirt. "Alright, can someone *finally* explain to me what the hell's going on here?"

Eleven shook her head. "We can't start without Mike and Dustin."

"They're downstairs," Will said. "Dustin and I decided to pick up Mike at the airport, 'cause we both haven't seen him in a while."

"Has anyone?" Lucas countered. "He's been backpacking across Europe for the past five years. I didn't think we'd ever seen him again, quite frankly, but I guess if there's anyone who can drag his skinny ass back to the States, it's El."

All eyes turned to her then and Eleven flushed, shrugging.

"Who wants banana bread?"

Everyone turned, blinking as Dustin entered the room with a wide, surgically fixed grin and a tray full of goodies.

"Aw, c'mon, don't everyone volunteer at once!" he quipped. "My wife made these, so she's gonna be pissed if I don't come home with an empty tray."

Eleven moved forward to take a piece, but that was when Mike entered the apartment, sun-kissed and all smiles as he practically hit his head on the low ceiling fan. His grin widened when he spotted his old friend.

"El!" he exclaimed, swooping in to give her a tight hug. "Thanks for inviting me. I have a feeling this is gonna be one killer party."

Catching the somber look in her eyes, he looked around at everyone and frowned. "Am I wrong? We've got banana bread and seven able-bodied, capable party-ers, and...wait. *Seven?*" Brow creasing, he looked over Eleven's shoulder at Billy, who was leaning awkwardly against the fridge. "What the fuck is *he* doing here?"

Eleven laid a hand on his arm. "He's our friend, Mike. He saved us, so he deserves to be here."

"Like hell, he does! I had to watch him beat the snot out of Steve, and quite frankly, almost *kill* Lucas, so excuse me if one measly sacrifice doesn't make me welcome him with open arms!"

"Measly?" Eleven blinked up at him, stunned. "How can you consider us being alive '*measly*'?"

Billy snorted. "El, it's fine."

"Oh, so now he's calling you El, too?"

"Mike, relax! You're embarrassing me..."

His mouth grew pinched, but he finally ducked his head, shame coloring his face. "I'm sorry... It's just...you *know* how much I care, so I don't want to see you getting hurt. None of us do."

Drawing a breath, Eleven nodded and moved toward the center of the room. "Saving lives is actually the reason we're all here today," she said. "Billy and I...we think the mindflayer's back."

"Holy shit..." Anxiously, Dustin began stuffing a piece of banana bread into his mouth. "Holy *shit*. I can't die before my anniversary! If I do, Margaret will bring me back to life, and then kill me herself!"

Stone-faced, Will swallowed. "Do you mind if I ask how you both came to this conclusion?"

"We had the same dream," Billy offered. "Or at least...*similar* dreams. I saw my doppelganger, and El...well...in *her* dream, she was overtaken by doppelgangers. By *all* of us."

Will swallowed, his throat bobbing reflexively. "I had the same kind

of dream," he whispered. "I was so dazed when I woke up that I thought maybe...I-I thought it couldn't possibly be real, so I ignored my instincts."

"We can still fix it," Eleven promised. Now looking around her, she asked, "Has anyone else had this dream?"

Hesitant, Max nodded. "It wasn't really that extreme, but I dreamed that I was in a room with my own shadow...like a twin."

Lucas shuddered. "I did too, actually...holy shit."

Dustin continued shoveling banana bread into his mouth, furiously shaking his head. "Man, you're all wiggling me out...I dreamed about a shadowy version of myself, too."

"Then that proves it," Eleven said. "The mindflayer's back."

"But why?" Mike countered. "Why now? It's been gone for ten years, so did it like...*regroup*, or is this a completely new mindflayer?"

Eleven shook her head. "I don't know...but it seems to believe it has unfinished business with me."

"Like hell, it does! We won't let it hurt you," Mike snapped. "Maybe we should get you out of here."

"She doesn't want to leave," Billy spoke up. "Believe me, I've already tried that tactic."

Mike soured at the other man's input, but promptly looked back to Eleven. "Is that really how you feel?"

She nodded.

"Then we'll be with you...to the bitter end."

"And let's hope this actually *is* the end this time," Dustin muttered. "Holy shit, I can't believe this..."

"Maybe we should eat?" Max suggested, a weak smile on her face.

Dustin laughed incredulously, bread crumbs flying from his mouth. "How can you even *think* of food at a time like this? I mean, *shit*."

"She's right," Eleven said. "Maybe if we just sit down and relax for a while, we can figure out our next move."

"But what if it can sense that?" Dustin fired back. "If it entered all our dreams, who's to say it's not reading our minds *right now*?"

Will frowned. "It's a chance we have to take...if we do nothing, we definitely won't survive this."

"Shit...oh, shit, shit, *shit*! All I wanted to do was hang out, and maybe talk about the cool new shark I read about this week, not...not life or *death* bullshit again."

Touching Dustin's arm, Eleven began leading him toward the couch. "Sit down," she commanded. "For the time being, we'll indulge ourselves and just catch up." She turned and glanced at Mike over her shoulder. "I think we all have a lot of catching up to do."

One by one, the group dispersed until only Mike and Billy remained. The former was clearly annoyed. He had been hoping to get Eleven alone, if only to talk more privately, but Billy was *still* hanging around like a permanent fixture.

"What gives?" he finally asked her. "Now that we've got a bit of a game plan, why is he still here? Do you like...owe him *money*, or something?"

Eleven rolled her eyes. "Mike, he's not going to hurt me, if that's what you're so worried about."

"And how do you know that? Maybe he's possessed by the mindflayer *right now*, and waiting for his chance to-"

"He spent the night. That's how we knew we had the same basic dream."

Mike gawped at her, stunned. "Wait...are you two...?"

"*What?* No, no, nothing like that, it's just...I knew he could help me. We've had a weird sort of bond ever since Starcourt."

"I *am* still here, you know," Billy called over to them, eyes closed as he remained sprawled across the couch. "If you're asking if my intentions are pure, Mikey-boy, I can one-hundred percent guarantee that Eleven would kick my ass if I ever tried anything. She's *already* thrown me into her bedroom wall."

Mike blinked at this bit of news, still trying to process everything. "Wait...what?"

"The answer is *no*, for fuck's sake. Now if you don't mind, I'm trying to sleep."

Mike looked back to Eleven, frustrated, only to quickly realize that she was on Billy's side. "Great. Fine," he muttered. "Can I at least call you later?"

"Of course." Pulling him in for a hug, Eleven mumbled, "Thanks for coming, Mike. I've missed you."

"Yeah...me, too. I-I mean! I've missed *you*, not myself, so...yeah." He pointed toward the door. "I'm just gonna go now."

"A wise decision," Billy called over to him.

Sheepishly curling his shoulders, Mike spared Eleven a shy smile before ducking out of the apartment. The door shut behind him, and the room fell into silence not long after.

"That kid's got zero game," Billy said, chuckling. "Maybe if he'd spent more time in bars instead of the Swiss Alps, he'd be back in the saddle."

"Oh, and what would *you* know of it?" Eleven crossly asked. "We may be broken up, but Mike's still very much my friend."

"Yeah, sure." Billy's eyes rolled beneath his closed lids. "He's *totally* over you."

"Mike broke up with me," she reminded him. "He wanted to see the

world and experience what life has to offer outside of Hawkins, so that's exactly what he did. I'm happy for him. Unlike most of us, he went out there and fulfilled his dreams."

Billy cracked an eye open, now appraising her from across the room. "I can't tell if you're ragging on me or not, though fortunately for me, I don't give a shit either way. Take me or leave me."

Eleven pursed her mouth. "Why do you do that?"

"Do what?"

"*That*. Erect walls and make sure nobody wants anything to do with you."

Billy blinked. "Y'know, it's kinda weird hearing you use the word 'erect,' so-

"I'm *serious*! Billy, as your friend, I really want to help you, but you're not making this easy for me."

"Help me with *what*? I don't need jack-shit," he spat. "Stop looking for something that isn't even there, alright? I'm not as great as you seem to think I am!"

"Yeah? Well you're not as *terrible* as you seem to think, either!"

Silence formed between them then, long and thick, before Billy broke it with an irate grumble. "Whatever. I'm gonna go take a shower. And when I get back, you'd better be in your room plotting how to get that *thing* instead of making *me* your goddamn pet project."

He stormed past her and their shoulders clipped, causing Eleven to wince as she held herself around the middle.

A/N: So who else started humming "Reunited" by Peaches and Herb? Just me? Okay... lol Well anyway, I didn't expect that writing for the kids as adults would be so much FUN? Admittedly, the reunion was something I was dreading, because I figured it'd be difficult/all over the place/kind of boring, but it ended up being the exact opposite of that for me. Especially with my boy Dustin, haha. Gotta love him! So with that being said, I hope you all enjoyed/aren't disappointed,

especially since I kind of glossed over things for now. It's surprisingly difficult to write so many characters at once! Anyway, to those of you who're also reading my Billy/Nancy fic, the next chapter for that is in the works, as well! :) Thanks so much for your continued support! It means so much to me!

INDIVIDUAL THANKS:

Kara: Thank you! This was honestly a lot of fun to write, so I hope you enjoyed it! :)

Shian1998: Thank you! :) I hope this met your expectations, cuz I didn't really focus too intently on Billy/Max since there were sooo many characters involved. That kind of made me feel compelled to move things along, but I'd definitely like to write them having a better heart-to-heart later on. And ofc! I couldn't stand having them not be friends anymore. I just wanted to show that friends drift apart, even the ones who loved each other so deeply.

madscientistproduction.01: Oh gosh, I knew I recognized your username! :) I feel terrible though, since I don't quite remember which fandom we interacted in (I have so many lol). But gosh, thank you! I truly appreciate that. That's such a compliment, gah.

4. The Past is the Past

A/N: Thanks so much for all the lovely support! It's really fueled me into continuing! :) Also, I wanted to forewarn you all that in this chapter, there are **abuse flashbacks and very brief self-harm**.

CH 4: The Past is the Past

Billy was pissed. It was bad enough that he'd always had his slimeball, asshole of a father on his case, but now Eleven? What the hell did she even *want* from him? He wasn't a goddamn hero, so she couldn't just expect him to be onboard with all of her fluffy, kumbaya bullshit.

Muttering to himself, Billy irritably scrubbed his body with a bar of soap – Eleven's, he guessed, since it smelled faintly of her skin – as the water continued to assault him with hot, stinging droplets.

"Stupid bitch," he growled. He'd show her...

The lights flickered, and fearfully, Billy looked up toward the overhead fixture. It sputtered forlornly once more, then suddenly left him in pure darkness. When he tried to breathe in, it felt as if there was tar in his lungs.

"You know why we're here."

Oh, fuck...

Pulse racing, he jerked as his doppelganger materialized before him, leering and smug.

"We're here for you, Billy."

"Like hell, you are! Fuck off!"

A familiar, restless tingle shot up his spine, and it was then that he remembered how it had felt to be taken over...how it had felt to be *flayed*.

Panicking, Billy ripped back the shower curtain and staggered toward

the mirror. In the dark, all he could truly see was a faint, ghostly outline of his body, but it was more than enough.

"Surrender yourself to us, Billy."

With a guttural roar, he lurched forward and headbutted his reflection, glass slicing into his skin and clattering into the sink. Behind him, the creature snarled with displeasure. It didn't want him hurting its precious vessel. Well, he'd do a lot more than *that*.

With trembling, searching fingers, Billy reached into the sink and closed his fist around the largest, sharpest piece of glass he could find.

"What are you doing?" the doppelganger hissed.

With tears in his eyes, Billy drew the glass up to rest beneath his chin. "What I should've done a long time ago."

"BILLY!"

All at once, the creature vanished and the lights came back on, his hand shaking so badly that he nicked his throat. A small, bright bead of blood leaked from the superficial cut, but otherwise, all was still. When he looked over at Eleven, he realized she was crying.

"Billy, give me the glass."

He swallowed. "No..."

She was angry now. "Billy, drop the fucking *glass*!"

He gawped at her, stunned. Never before had he heard her swear, nor had he ever seen her so broken and terrified. Shaking, he dropped the glass into the sink and stumbled away from the mirror. Despite the potential awkwardness of his state of dress (or lack thereof), Eleven seemed far too focused on his wounds to care.

Her hands immediately moved to his throat, assessing the damage as she wept, before sliding upward to cup his bleeding face. "You *idiot*," she choked. "What were you doing? What...w-what happened?"

Billy shook his head, his eyes glassy. It was all so surreal, if he was being honest with himself. In between the mindflayer and his own demons, he had never seen someone look so scared, so *concerned* for his well-being. It cut him deep. He'd forgotten what *real* love looked like, and as he miserably returned Eleven's gaze, he realized that she still cared for him. He didn't know *why*, but she did, and he hated the thought of having disappointed her.

"I wouldn't have done it," he feebly said, "it's just...the mindflayer..."

Eleven nodded, her chin trembling with emotion. "It's okay, I've got you," she promised. "Just let me get a first-aid kit, okay?" Her gaze dropped then, and she suddenly seemed to realize their awkward dilemma. Swallowing, her cheeks burned and she promptly looked to the side. "Um...and maybe some pants, too. Do you think you can walk to my bedroom?"

Nodding, Billy dazedly allowed Eleven to wrap a towel around his waist, and then lead him into sitting (more like *flopping*) onto her bed. She flitted around him, grabbing various items and swearing, before she finally returned to his side and had a seat.

"You've cut yourself pretty badly," she mumbled. "Did you break the mirror with your head?"

Billy nodded, staring down at his lap.

Laying out the proper medical equipment, Eleven took a pair of tweezers and began plucking the sharp, tiny bits of glass from his skin. "This is going to hurt," she warned.

"Yeah, I already feel that, thanks."

She smiled ruefully at his sarcasm, lowering her eyes as she dabbed a sterile cloth against his wounds. "I know this might be a dumb question, but...do you wanna talk about it?"

"Talk about *what*? I already told you it was the mindflayer, so-"

"Yes, but...the glass." Appearing pained, she applied Neosporin to his wounds and glanced briefly into his eyes – *haunted and sad*. "It seemed to me that you were trying to...to *hurt* yourself. Had you ever

done that before?"

"Maybe." Billy's tone was indifferent, yet his expression was numb. "I figured if I hurt myself enough, the mindflayer would move on to some other poor bastard."

Eleven flushed pink. "Don't you *ever* do that again. Do you hear me?" Tightening her hold on the tweezers, she spat, "There are so few people in this world who're important to me, Billy, but *you* are definitely one of them. And I know it's hard for you to be selfless, but if you could just *try* and remember that..." She trailed off then, shaking her head. "Forget it. You're a stubborn ass, and I know you won't listen to me anyway."

Billy blinked at her, stunned. "And where the hell is all this coming from, huh? All I did was break one lousy mirror. If it'll stop you from getting your panties in a twist, I'll buy you a new one. Jesus."

Eleven didn't say anything. Grim and determined, she continued to patch him up, her vision blurring with tears as she worked. Billy was scarred – God, he was *so scarred* – and her tender heart ached at the ugly, knotted criss-crosses littering his battered torso. She hadn't spotted him shirtless after the incident at Starcourt (until now), and she couldn't help but wonder if these markings brought him shame.

Trembling, Eleven hesitated before pressing her palm against the jagged, lumpy scarring on his flank. Billy lurched a moment, startled, but otherwise said nothing. Pain... She felt so much *pain*.

Weeping openly now, Eleven traced a finger along his spine until she brushed across an old, pale mark that was slightly off-center. She jerked at the sudden connection between their minds.

"Worthless! I'll teach you to take my fishing lures, you spineless faggot!"

Young Billy held up his hands, terrified, before Neil sent the boy sprawling backwards into his dresser. His back bent awkwardly and he yelped, curling into the fetal position as he began bleeding from the contact wound.

"Go on, get up, pussy-boy! And quit your goddamn crying!"

Eleven sniveled, her head shaking from the horrific image. Almost too terrified to see more, she brushed her thumb along a deep groove on Billy's shoulder blade.

"Hold still, you miserable little shit! If you move one muscle, I'm just gonna hit you harder!"

Billy remained faced away from Neil, trying his best not to cry as he kept his shirt pulled over his head.

Lifting his arm, Neil brought his belt down against the boy's back with a heady, sick sense of satisfaction. Each sharp, stinging crack against his skin left an angry red welt in its wake.

By now, Eleven was crying so hard that she could barely breathe. "Billy," she sobbed. "Billy, Billy..." She pressed her face in between his shoulder blades, almost as if she could somehow shield his younger self from the assault. "I'm so sorry..."

All at once, his spine went rigid. "What the fuck are you sorry for? Cut that shit out!"

In truth, she was scaring him. Despite the fact he couldn't tell what was happening, he felt an odd, unnatural pressure in his soul – almost as if he were being *infiltrated*. Did that mean...?

Feeling sick, Billy sharply jerked away from her. "Get the fuck off me."

Eleven was immovable. Sliding her hands to his cheeks, she wept as he aggressively avoided eye contact. Her fingers slipped over his ear and she whimpered, feeling gut-punched when she was once more transported back to the Hargrove household.

"What the fuck is this?" Neil barked, pointing at Billy's piercing. "You think you can just spend your money on a bunch of stupid, faggoty shit while living under my roof?"

Billy lifted his chin. "No, sir."

"Take it out!"

He hesitated, then said again, only with more conviction, "No, sir."

That did it. Neil was on him in an instant, smacking and punching until he was able to just yank the stud out of his ear. Billy howled and clapped a hand down onto the bleeding wound.

"Now get out of my house, you stupid, worthless piece of shit! And don't come back until you're ready to be a man!"

Practically sagging against Billy, Eleven wept and pressed her forehead to his, her fingers weaving through his short curls with a plaintive, pitiful desperation. "I wish I'd known you then," she whispered. "I wish...I-I wish..."

"Don't." His tone was harsh, yet his eyes were shining with tears. "Don't you fucking *dare* treat me like all the rest. I'm not sick, I'm not *broken*, and I'm sure as hell not yours to fix." Furiously, he ripped her hands from his face. "Don't you *ever* get into my head again. You hear me?"

Eleven flinched, yet she couldn't bring herself to be afraid of him. "Billy, you don't have to pretend with me... I've literally *seen* you at your most vulnerable, so-"

"Shut up. Just shut your goddamn mouth!" Rocketing up from his perch, he leaned forward and pointed a shaking finger in her face. "You wanna help me? Stay the *fuck* away. I don't need you – I don't need *any* of you. Maybe this mindflayer is exactly what I need!"

Tears streamed down Eleven's face, yet he ignored the sharp, pitiful throb in his chest. This wasn't like him. He didn't fucking *care* about other people, because they never cared about *him*.

Billy moved to storm off, but Eleven managed to catch hold of his hand, her eyes somber and pleading.

"I can't stay away," she whispered. "You didn't abandon me at Starcourt, so I'm not going to abandon you either." She closed her eyes then, sniveling. "I know you're just trying to hurt me, Billy, and I *know* you'll never believe a word I say, but...I'm on your side. I always have been, and I always will be."

Billy jerked free of her grasp, feeling as though her soft, gentle touch had burned his skin. *You're wrong*, he wanted to scream. *All women are liars*.

Instead, he threw his towel in her face and barreled out of the room, his breath like knife points in his lungs as he found his aggression waning. He didn't hate her...

And that *terrified* him.

A/N: WELP, this ended up a lot angrier than I originally intended. I was going to have it be a bit fluffier, I guess? But Billy took over, and was like NOPE, NOT DOING THAT, so what you see is what you get, haha. I guess this is more of a filler chapter, but I'm glad I was able to get it out since I've been daydreaming about this scene long before this chapter. Hope you enjoyed! And thanks to everyone who's read/ let me know what they think! :)

P.S. I've been picturing older!Eleven like Natalie Portman in *Garden State*. It's actually crazy how similar they look (shout-out to BundyShoes for the awesome FC suggestion!).

INDIVIDUAL THANKS:

Kara: Haha, thank you! I love writing Dustin, so I'm glad you enjoyed him in particular! And hopefully this heart-to-heart was even better for you than the last! :)

Shian1998: Oh yeah, he definitely deserved that scolding, haha. I took a certain delight in having him be chummy with Lucas, cuz I personally like the idea of him being the overprotective, but grudgingly accepting brother. And I think if Billy had survived, they could've all eventually gotten there. As for the older members, I'm unsure of that just now, tbh! It was a lot of work writing for seven characters in one room (it's much easier with a script opposed to fanfiction), so I'm not sure if I could handle adding to that number. We'll see, though! I might at least mention them at some point. :) And thanks!

madscientistproduction.01: Thank you! :) And ahhh, yes! I'm still technically part of the Hannibal fandom, though more so because I

have a hard time letting go of Abby and Will, in particular. I still write an occasional fic, but this is definitely stealing all my attention!

EraticMind:Me, too! :) I was honestly nervous about posting that since I hadn't really seen any BxE, but I'm glad I decided to stick with it. Thanks so much for the lovely comment! :)

5. Vulnerable

CH 5: Vulnerable

Billy's head was pounding. After sucking down a glass of water and a couple painkillers, he grumpily made himself breakfast and sat at the small table in the kitchen.

Eleven came out not long after. She looked flushed and anxious as she rushed around, clearly searching for something she needed for the day. After a moment, she realized Billy was there and laughed self-consciously. "Oh, you're up!" she said. "Would you like some waffles?"

"What, you mean that frozen crap you used to eat all the time? No thanks."

"Suit yourself." Finally finding her car keys, Eleven tucked them into her purse and headed for the fridge. Billy seemed intent on acting as though nothing had happened, so she was happy to humor him. For now.

Looking around inside the freezer, she pouted once she realized she was out of Eggos. "Guess I'll need to make a grocery run after work," she muttered. "You need anything?"

"Nah. I'm good with whatever you've got."

"Spoken like a true guest." Smiling, Eleven came over and stood alongside him, finally looking a little sheepish. "So, um...you're going to have a visitor today."

"What?"

"It's Max...since you've proven you can't be alone, she agreed to come out and stay with you until I return."

Groaning, Billy threw his spoon down in disgust. "You seriously got me a *babysitter*? For fuck's sake, El, I'm a grown man, not...not a dribbling little shitbag."

"Maybe so, but I'm not taking any chances, and neither is Max. She's supposed to be here any minute."

Knock. Knock. Knock.

"Ah! See? There she is now."

Scowling, Billy watched Eleven move over to the door, then admit his grinning sister. In her hand was a bag full of board games.

"You gotta be shitting me..."

"C'mon, Billy," Max cajoled. "El told me how you were ranting and raving without pants on, so I knew I had to come over. It seems like you have a teensy bit of a problem."

Billy snorted. "Plenty of women have seen me without pants on, and they've never thought it was 'teensy' or a 'problem.'"

"Ugh, *gross!*"

Eleven laughed, then quickly disguised it as a yawn. She wasn't keen on being questioned about *her* opinion on the matter. "So, um, it looks like I'd better get going! Thanks so much for staying with him, Max."

"Of course! It'll be just like old times. Right, Billy?"

He did nothing but scowl.

Chewing her lip, Eleven placed a hand on his back, then awkwardly wrapped her arms around his shoulders in a loose, yet affectionate hug. Her perfumed hair tickled his nose and he swallowed.

"Be nice, okay? I'll be back sometime after five." Smiling, she leaned in and pressed a kiss to his cheek.

Billy jerked away, startled by the sudden contact. He heard very little after – just pleasantries between Eleven and his sister – before Max returned and placed Clue down onto the table.

"Let's get started!" she said.

Surly, Billy lifted the lid off the game and set up the pieces, trembling somewhat as the soft, sweet pressure of Eleven's mouth lingered like a brand on his skin.

"Your move."

Billy sighed, leaning back in his seat. "Max, I'm tired of playing."

"Okay, well..." She waved a hand. "Maybe we should talk about the elephant in the room."

"*What* elephant?"

"You and El...she seems different."

He snickered darkly, chucking his game piece back into the box. "That's because she knows about Neil."

"What? You mean...you actually *talked* to her?" Unbidden, a hint of jealousy flashed across Max's eyes. Billy had *never* had a heart-to-heart with her growing up, even when she'd needed it most.

Billy met her gaze with scorn. "Try something a bit more *realistic*."

"Oh, um...her powers?"

"Bingo."

"Shit..." Max knew Billy wouldn't have liked that. Despite his coldness, he valued and even *respected* others' privacy, so she now at least understood why he was in such a bad mood. "Did you talk about it afterward?"

"Fuck no. What do I look like, a guidance counselor?"

Shrugging, Max slowly began putting their pieces away. "Well, I wish you'd talk to me..."

"Why?" He was aggravated now. "Wasn't it bad enough having to *live* it?"

Eyes stinging, Max reached across the table and touched his hands. "Neil was – *is* – a prick, Billy. Those kinds of scars don't just go away, and now that we're older, I thought..."

"No." Billy vigorously shook his head. "Our eyes are on the front of our heads for a reason, Max. I'm *not* going to look back, and I sure as shit don't plan on talking about it either."

Hurt, she withdrew and looked down at the floor. "It got worse after you left, you know."

"Maxie..."

"I'd always suspected he had a weird fixation on you, but with you gone, he needed a new punching bag."

"Max, *please*."

"Lucas got me out of there as soon as he could – I lived with him and his family for a while – and then we finally moved out on our own. I guess I shouldn't be, since she never worried about us, but I can't help but worry about Susan."

Billy ducked his face down into his palms, rubbing his stinging eyes. "She made her choice," he whispered. "Just as we've made ours."

"Yeah..." Max sniffled. "But I'm still sorry all the same." Silence encompassed them then, long and thick before she softly said, "I love you, Billy. I know we never say it, but I do. I guess it took nearly losing you – *twice* – to get that through my thick skull."

Billy's chest tightened and he looked away. "Yeah... Me too, kid."

Max knew it was difficult for him to say those three words, and that he probably never really would, so tearfully, she laid a hand over his and squeezed.

Work had been long, but fulfilling that day, and Eleven was relaxed now that only a box of Eggos stood between herself and her return to Billy.

Humming under her breath, she moved to open the freezer door just when she heard a noise.

Turning her head, she realized a middle-aged man was further down the aisle, muttering to himself as he looked between the frozen goods and his shopping list. It was clear he wasn't usually the one in this position.

The longer Eleven stared, the deeper her dread grew. She *knew* this man...

Breath catching in her throat, her hands began to tighten around her shopping cart. It was Neil Hargrove – she'd know that bastard anywhere.

A familiar, restless tingle formed in her fingertips, and her pulse began to quicken.

"C'mere, you worthless piece of shit! Stop running, or I'll whip you harder!"

Young Billy's pitiful, plaintive cries fueled her, and with a cry of her own, Eleven furiously jerked her arm upward, and the freezer door in front of Neil swung open. The hard edge knocked him in the face, and stunned, he went sprawling back just as the glass exploded.

"My nose!" he cried. "I...I-I think it's broken!"

Blood gushed from his now misshapen nose, and Eleven began to move her cart toward him with purpose.

Neil spotted her and held out a hand. "Please, Miss, go get a supervisor!"

"Mouth-breather," she bit back, relishing in his stunned expression.

"You...you *bitch*! Just who do you think you are? I'll...!"

A display of cookies fell on top of him then, temporarily silencing his threats.

As Neil cursed and screamed, Eleven walked off with a smug grin on

her face.

Will Byers jerked awake, panting, his hand tremblingly patting at his chest, stomach and face. It had all been a dream, right? He would know if he'd been flayed...

"Hello, again."

Will jerked, frozen with fear as his doppelganger appeared by his bedside. Unable to scream, a lone tear trickled down his cheek as he gasped and wheezed.

"We need you to help us one last time," it hissed. "Do not resist us, Will."

It laid a cold, sickly hand on top of Will's forehead, and then the paralyzed man screamed as everything went black.

A/N: I've made a fan mix to accompany this series, if anyone's interested! It's on **8tracks** and called **"Billy & Eleven: Cruel World"** by **musicboxmemories**. I've also made one for Billy and Nancy (called **Billy x Nancy: Bitter & Sick**). Anyway, this was mostly another filler chapter! I don't think I have to say that my favorite part was El attacking Neil lol.

INDIVIDUAL THANKS:

Kara: Gosh, thank you so much! It was definitely a painful scene to write, but one I really wanted to depict since I feel it's important to both of them healing.

Shian1998: Agreed! It's one of those shows where I'm curious how they can keep it going, especially since they keep (supposedly) killing the mindflayer. Billy unfortunately would probably need a TON of therapy, seeing how vastly scarred his heart was from years of abuse, but if there's anyone who can bring him back, it seems to be Eleven. Her brief act of kindness in the show sparked something in him, so I definitely think she could do it again years later!

madscientistproduction.01: Haha, so do I...though I guess that's obvious. :P And gosh, how far did you get in *Hannibal*? Because I'll be honest, I hated S3 and thought it was a disservice to most of the

characters (Abigail and Will, especially). S2 was just alright. Nothing will beat S1 for me, which was truest to the books. I wasn't interested in Will becoming "dark," so I got tired of the constant flirting with that idea, especially when S3 was essentially a rehash of S2, but far more boring and slow. Abigail became my favorite, so I think S3 was so boring for me because she and Beverly were no longer there. But that's another rant for another day, haha.

fanficscool: Ahhh, that's such a huge compliment, thank you so much! I tend to gravitate toward what are considered the "rare/weird" ships, so I guess this was inevitable lol. I definitely plan to keep it going, but the primary problem is figuring out how to end everything. I have a few ideas, but I'm a pretty spontaneous writer, so it's just kind of like...weLP, I guess I'll figure it all out eventually, haha. Thanks again!

6. Boundaries

CH 6: Boundaries

"Hey, champ, it's me again...just calling to see if we're still on for tomorrow. Okay, love you...bye." Hanging up, Jonathan looked down at the floor with a sigh.

"Babe, what is it?" Coming in from the other room, Nancy hugged her swollen belly, fondly cradling the life she would soon deliver. "Have you heard from Will yet?"

Jonathan shook his head, disgruntled.

"Well, if it makes you feel any better, I'm sure he's just busy with Mike. He's in town again, so it'd make sense for Will to be MIA."

"Yeah, but without telling me? It doesn't feel right, Nance." Nervously beginning to pace, he only halted again when Nancy touched his arm.

"I'm sure he's fine," she said. "But if it'll put your mind at ease, we can go over to his place and check."

Jonathan nodded, his lips lifting into a tired smile. "Thanks... I know he's probably okay, but he's just been through *so much*, y'know? Like, to the point of it being unfair."

Nancy curled her arms around his elbow, fondly nudging her cheek into his shoulder. "I'll go get my coat."

Stooping down to kiss her forehead, Jonathan squeezed her arms before heading off to grab his keys.

"Shiiit, look at this wine list!" Dustin exclaimed, poring over his menu with a grin. "Since Billy's treating, I say we all order a glass."

Billy scoffed. "Whoa, whoa, I never said..."

"Relax, old man. Stress causes wrinkles."

With a sarcastic nod and smile, Billy flipped the bird while swiping the list.

"Hey!"

"Gotta make sure it's kid tested and approved," he quipped, keeping it out of Dustin's reach while Max tried to play mediator.

"Would you two cool it? We're in a *restaurant*, not a zoo!"

Billy turned to Dustin with a wink. "Don't mind her. Ever since she babysat me, she suddenly thinks she's an adult."

Mike pounded his fist onto the table. "Alright, *enough*. I thought the whole point of this dinner was to figure everything out?"

Eleven frowned. "But what about Will? Shouldn't we wait for him?"

"I haven't been able to get a hold of him all day," Mike admitted, "but I'm not too worried. It's Jonathan's birthday this week, so they're probably just hanging out."

Lucas shook his head. "I dunno, man...it's not like Will to just blow us off like this."

"Okay, agreed, but we can check on him later," Mike promised. "If Will were here, he'd say it's more important to keep our minds focused."

Dustin frowned. "Focused on *what*, exactly? I haven't had any follow-up dreams, so I don't even know what's happening anymore."

"I haven't really either," Max admitted. "Maybe the mindflyer went away?"

Eleven shook her head. "I don't think so... I mean, when has the mindflyer *ever* just given up like that? It has to be around here somewhere."

"And looking for a host," Billy agreed. Passing his empty beer bottle in between his hands, he swallowed. "What if the reason things are quiet now is because it's finally found one?"

The group looked between each other, horrified, just as their waitress appeared to take their orders. She was a bubbly, charming sort, so their good humor was instantly restored. Mike seemed especially full of himself now that the mood was reset. While everyone told the waitress what they wanted, he kept leaning over to whisper in Eleven's ear. And she actually *laughed*. Billy scowled, wondering what could be so goddamn funny at a time like this.

"And for you, hon?"

Tonguing the corner of his mouth, he irritably pointed to a spot on the menu, never taking his eyes off his temporary roommate and that goddamn stick bug. Eleven laughed again, and quite loudly too, so Billy told the waitress, "I'll have another one of these, if you don't mind."

Lifting his empty beer off the table, the blonde winked. "You got it, sugar."

She was probably flirting with him. Billy knew it was odd that he wasn't paying attention to her, given how she was blonde and pretty, and conventionally what he was drawn to, but he couldn't concentrate with the ridiculous display going on in front of him. What were they, *twelve*? They *had* met around that age...

Mike leaned in and whispered again, to which Eleven snickered and touched his arm. For fuck's *sake*. Why had *he* been the one seated across from the lovebirds?

Eleven met his gaze then and she beamed, her smile warm and full. Billy knew he had never made her look like that. Not that he fucking *cared*, but seeing this side of her was...*obnoxious*.

The waitress returned with his beer then, and gratefully, Billy snatched it right from her hand. "Thanks, babe." He spared her a wink. "Say, what are you doing after your shift?"

"Oh, um...!" She immediately became flustered, preening beneath his pseudo-flirtatious gaze. "I dunno...going home, probably?"

"Going *home*? On a night like this?" Billy wagged a finger, grinning as

he leaned in on his elbows. "Why don't I take you someplace special, huh? You look like you could use a good time."

Despite the fact Billy hadn't said anything funny, the blonde threw her head back in a chirpy, delighted laugh. "Oh, gosh! Um...I'll totally think about it, Mr...?"

"Billy." He took her hand, pressing it gently. "I'll be waiting on that answer."

"Delores!"

The blonde stiffened, realizing that her boss was watching. "Oh, um, I'd better get back to work!" She bit her lip. "I'll see you later?"

"You can count on it, babe."

After she'd gleefully walked off, Dustin punched his arm. "You are the *man*. Did everyone see that? I mean, I always thought Steve had game, but *shit*."

"It's all in the wrist," Billy quipped. When he looked over at Eleven, he was surprised to see that her bright demeanor had mellowed, her mouth thin and pinched as she scowled at him. Mike kept trying to draw her attention, but she was no longer listening.

"I need to use the bathroom," she tightly said.

Max perked up. "Do you need me to come with you?"

"No thanks."

No longer looking at Billy, Eleven rose and hotly stalked off toward the neon sign in the back.

Lucas snorted. "Well what's crawled up *her* ass, huh?"

"Maybe it's the mindflayer," Dustin joked, to which Max shot him a warning glare.

"That's not funny, *asshole*. It could really happen!"

"What, so you think the mindflayer's going to start crawling up-?"

"There are way too many fucking people at this table," Billy muttered. "I'm gonna go take a piss too."

Max frowned. "Gross! Keep that to yourself, maybe?"

Almost playfully ruffling her hair, Billy rose and began making his way back toward the same bright, sickeningly green neon sign. His heart drummed between his ribs, and as he looked at the battered, weathered door, he realized it wasn't even locked. An *invitation*, maybe?

Still nettled, Billy ripped open the door and stumbled inside, meeting Eleven's startled gaze in the mirror.

"Just what the hell kinda game do you think you're playing, huh?" he asked, abruptly closing the door. "I expect this kinda shit from other girls, but *not* you. I don't *like* being jerked around."

"Billy..." Eleven's expression was soft as she approached, her voice deceptively calm. "Lock the door."

"Huh?"

She gingerly moved past him, her eyes never leaving his as she pushed the lock into place. He felt a momentary spark of panic. What the fuck was he doing? What the *fuck* was he after?

"You need to tell me why you're here," she commanded.

"I don't fucking *know* why, okay? I thought this was a get-together to save lives, not...not to fucking *rekindle* old flames."

Eleven's brow creased. "What are you talking about?"

"You and the stick bug. You can't seriously tell me he's not putting on the moves, and all when we're trying to make progress here." Billy chuckled humorlessly. "It's slick though, I'll give him that. *Real* slick."

Eleven scoffed. "Are you *jealous* or something?"

"Jealous? Do I fucking *look* jealous to you?"

"You just came in here ranting and raving, telling me to stop jerking you around, so yeah. You *do*."

Billy's temper flared. Grabbing an old bar of soap (the only thing within reach), he furiously hurled it across the room. It splintered against the wall and scattered across the floor.

Eleven flinched, yet she was immovable. "You won't hurt me," she whispered. "You want people to think you're a cold, unfeeling monster – to protect yourself, I guess – but you're not. I've *seen* the real you."

Furious, Billy took Eleven by the shoulders and slammed her against the wall, her back hitting the tile so strongly that she gasped. With tears in her eyes, she laid a hand over his pounding heart and shook her head. "You *won't* hurt me," she said again. "Not ever."

Something inside Billy fractured. Desperate to prove her wrong – she was a goddamn *liar!* – he yanked her hair and crashed his mouth harshly into hers, his teeth piercing her lower lip with a savagery that radiated from his very core. Eleven whimpered and clawed at his shoulders. *That's right, you fucking bitch. Not so nice now, am I?* Sucking at her split lip, he tasted blood and licked the affliction. Would anything but a *monster* do that?

Trembling, Billy withdrew and held fast to Eleven's arms, his pulse quickening at the sight of her flushed cheeks, dusky eyes, and bloody, swollen mouth. She was *marked* now – marked and *his*. With scarlet smeared from her lips to her chin, she didn't appear angry or vengeful. She appeared...*tender*.

"Billy..." Her hand lifted then, and flinching, he gaped back at her as she fondly cupped his face.

"Don't," he hissed.

She didn't listen. With tears in her eyes, Eleven closed the distance between them and pressed a soft, barely there kiss to his mouth. She was so careful and *loving* in the way she handled him, and nausea

gripped him by the throat as he remained frozen from her touch. *Goddamn* her!

Wrapping her arms around his neck, Eleven broke the kiss and nudged her cheek into his, causing the fracture in Billy's heart to grow.

"Stop it," he hissed. "Don't you fucking *touch* me." Billy shivered, traitorously nuzzling her cheek as his mouth brushed over the corner of her bloodied, trembling lips. He could practically *taste* the desperation on her tongue.

Her hands twisted into his hair, and then she coaxed his mouth back over hers, slow and deep. Her continued gentleness enraged him all the more.

With a guttural snarl, Billy smashed his fist against the tile and pushed away from her. Eleven sagged against the wall on unsteady limbs, stunned.

"Billy...?"

Unable to speak, he turned and stormed out of the bathroom, leaving behind a bunch of wide-eyed onlookers who'd been waiting in line.

Sniveling, Eleven straightened her clothes and pressed a finger against her lip. Pain radiated from the wound, and when she glanced over at her reflection, she realized it was swollen and bruised.

"Honey, are you alright?"

She didn't answer. Instead, she ducked her chin and pushed past everyone toward the exit.

"He's not answering."

With a frown, Nancy looked around Will's backyard, feeling disquieted by the endless night. "Maybe he's sleeping? His car's still here, so..."

"I'll get my spare." Fishing around inside his pocket, Jonathan

unearthed the key before twisting it into the lock. The door opened with little resistance.

All at once, they were stricken by just how *cold* it was. Nancy hugged herself for warmth and glanced at the thermostat. "Jonathan..."

"Yeah?"

"Look..." Pointing toward the numbers, she showed her husband that the dial had been turned down to its lowest possible setting.

Jonathan's mouth went dry. "Oh, God..." Turning toward the back rooms, he called, "Will? Hey Will, it's me and Nancy!"

"Hello, Jonathan."

Both of them turned then, startled. Will – or at least, what *appeared* to be Will – stood in the doorway, blank-faced and unmoving.

Jonathan placed an arm in front of Nancy. "On the count of three, I want you to go back to the car."

Her eyebrows shot upward. "W-what? *No!* I'm not leaving you, I-"

"Go, Nancy! For the baby!"

A sharp, unnatural scream came from Will's lips, and then a tentacle-like limb shot toward them.

Shoving Nancy toward the door, Jonathan ducked out of the way just as it smashed through the neighboring wall.

"Go get help!" he called to his wife.

Sobbing, Nancy took off for the car, clutching her middle as a feeble form of protection. She could hear shouts and crashing furniture behind her, but still she ran, blinded by tears as she raced for their car.

It wasn't long before she realized that she didn't have the keys... They were still with *Jonathan*.

Tasting bile, Nancy steeled herself before promptly returning back to the house. "Jonathan!" she called. "*Jonathan?!?*"

When she reached the entryway, she peered inside and found nothing but broken glass. Heart pounding, she clutched at her chest and slowly inched her way inside, hot tears streaming down her cheeks as her breath burned inside her lungs. "J-Jonathan...? Honey? I...I-I need the keys..."

A dark figure appeared behind her then, and when she turned around, it covered her in tentacles and a terrified scream caught in her throat.

A/N: Gahhh, I'm not one-hundred percent satisfied with this, so I hope it was okay! I'd planned all this tender/tragic stuff in my head, and then when I actually finally *wrote* it, everything was kind of just...bleh. lol Also, Billy was basically me when he said, "There are way too many fucking people at this table," 'CAUSE IT'S SO HARD TO WRITE SEVEN CHARACTERS AT ONCE lol. At this point, I'm officially caught up with all my ideas, so I doubt I'll be as quick in updating as I have been. I certainly hope I'll surprise myself, 'cause you've all been lovely, and I'm really enjoying trying my hand at these characters!

INDIVIDUAL THANKS:

Kara: Believe me, I'm concerned too, cuz I have no idea what I'm doing, haha. xD But thanks! So glad you enjoyed that! :P

Shian1998: LOL I actually don't think it would've been a good idea for El to kill Neil, because even though he's a monster, a part of Billy still craves his approval and affection. So if she actually *took* that potential relationship from him, I don't think he'd be happy with her. If anyone has to kill Neil, Billy would probably want the honor to go to himself. Besides, they were also in the middle of a grocery store, so that'd be hard to explain away. :P And it sadly wasn't a dream! They all kind of got a "warning dream" at first, and now the second appearances are attempts at actual infiltration. The mindflayer tried to infiltrate Billy in CH 4, but failed. It's basically going to go around trying to get them all one by one.

madscientistproduction.01: I know, it's kind of crazy that they don't all have therapy at this point lol. And yeah, it just wasn't the same show afterward. :/ The writers were trying too hard to please fangirls without actually *giving* them what they wanted, and I had to see Abigail's dead body being embalmed/her organs being removed, so I was pretty damn traumatized. I cried so hard. So yeah, I don't really recommend continuing, tbqh! I just keep rewatching S1 and pretending it got canceled after that. Which would've sucked, at the time, but in retrospect I wish it had happened that way.

fanficscool: Thank you! :) I love the potential for Max and Billy's dynamic, so it's a shame they never fully got to bond on the show. I guess that's what fanfiction's for though *weeps* And nope, definitely not Billy/El/Nancy! I mentioned a Billy/Nancy fan mix since I wasn't sure when I'd be updating my B/N fanfic. And since I've been strongly favoring this one, I decided to mention the mix here in the meantime. I don't really consider this a love triangle (mostly cuz I'm not a huge fan of them), but if it's going to be between anyone, I'd say it'd be Billy/El/Mike.

7. Confessions

CH 7: Confessions

"Did you seriously think I'd let you get away?"

Eleven shivered, Billy's lips brushing against her ear as she gripped at the porcelain sink. She turned her head slightly, trembling as his mouth grazed her cheek and pressed to the corner of her lips.

"Are you finally gonna behave for me, princess?"

Squirming, she felt him blanket her body and begin to lift her skirt. "I...I-I didn't do anything wrong," she whispered.

"Maybe not, but you're about to," he fired back, edging her panties down over her knees.

"Ah!" Clapping a hand over her mouth, Eleven sank against her pillows and arched. Her hand continued to work tirelessly between her legs, and when she recalled the rough, brutal way Billy had manhandled her, she spasmed hard and finally fell over that blissful, freeing precipice.

Oh...

That wasn't good.

Trying not to laugh at the bleak *absurdity* of her situation, she only jerked to attention when someone furiously pounded on her door.

"El? C'mon, open up!"

"Uhhh... Just a minute!" Awkwardly wiping her hand onto her sheets, she pulled her underwear and shorts back into place before staggering out of bed. With part of her sheet tucked into the waistband of her panties, she ripped open the door with a tight, expectant smile.

Billy huffed. "'bout fucking time. Where are your clean towels?" Impatiently, he gestured to himself, and he was...God, he was

dripping wet with her bathroom rug wrapped around his waist. If Eleven wasn't currently so *sensitive*, she would have laughed.

"Towels? *Hello?*" He snapped his fingers in front of her face.

"Umm... I might have an extra one in here." Pulse thrumming, she rummaged around in her closet before finding a spare. *Think pure thoughts, El.* "So, um...was it hard?"

"Huh?"

Wow. So much for being pure and wholesome... Flushing, she draped the towel over her arm and came back over to the doorway, laughing it off. "Nothing, I just...it must've been hard getting rid of that waitress – Delores? – last night."

"No, not really. I kinda forgot about her, to be honest."

Eleven bit her lip. So hard, in fact, that she winced as it split back open.

"So are you gonna give me that towel, or...?"

"Oh! Yes, yes, obviously, I'm just...here you go!" Shoving it against his chest, Eleven stepped back and tongued her bleeding lip.

Billy arched a brow. "You feeling okay?"

"No! I-I mean...yes! Yes, I'm not!" *Fuck.*

Chuckling, Billy shrugged and began wiping his face with the towel. "Alright, if you say so. By the way, Max is coming over again...I probably should've asked before inviting her over, but we had a good time the other day."

"Really?" Finally mellowing out somewhat, Eleven brightened. "That's great news! I know Max has really missed you, so-"

"Yeah, yeah, no need to get all sentimental about it. She's coming over for drinks this evening, so I thought maybe you might wanna join us?"

"Oh...well..."

"It'd give us a nice buffer, just in case we start tearing into each other. And besides..." He flashed her a coy smile. "I'd really appreciate it if you were there."

Eleven looked up at him, amusement twinkling in her eyes. He was *good*. He knew his way around all sorts of female manipulation, so she felt minorly disappointed in herself for agreeing. "If I join you, I'm guessing I'll have to go out and buy some drinks?"

"Already taken care of. Max said she'll be bringing some beer...maybe something a bit stronger, too."

Eleven folded her hands, nodding. "That sounds great! I, um...I really *do* need to get going through. Work awaits!"

"Looking forward to it," he agreed, chuckling. "Oh, and El?"

"Yes?"

"Nice tail." With a wink, he laughed and headed off down the hallway, causing Eleven to look over her shoulder and flush bright pink.

Eleven wasn't really used to parties and social get-togethers. She'd had them every Christmas and Thanksgiving, but between her and her very small group of friends, hanging out at home during her adult life had never really been an option. Or at least, not after Max had gotten married.

"You're going to *love* this," the redhead chirped, waving around a bottle of sake. "Lu and I got it on our travels. It'll curl your hair and bring a smile to your face."

Eleven blinked. "*Really?*"

"No, of course not! Though it'll definitely make you smile." Setting it onto the table, she looked up as Billy entered the room. "And where have *you* been? I see you only appear when the snacks are ready!"

He shrugged, swiping a cookie before having a seat at the kitchen table. "For never wanting to know my business, you sure do ask about it a lot."

Max huffed. "I'm sorry, I didn't realize that was such an invasive question!"

He made a jerking off motion, to which she screeched and threw a bag of chips in his face.

"You are *disgusting*, you pervert!"

"Well *now* who's the pervert? I never said that's what I was doing!" Shoveling another cookie into his mouth, he reached across the table and opened the sake. "Never got to try this stuff before," he admitted. "I take it you went to Japan?"

With her good humor returning, Max beamed and nodded. "Yeah, for my honeymoon. It's a pretty bad-ass place. I think you'd really like it." When Eleven reached to pour herself a glass, she admonished, "Not too much, El! It's a deceptive drink, 'cause it doesn't taste as powerful as it actually is."

Billy snorted. "If she defeated the mindflayer once, I think she can handle a bit of alcohol poisoning."

Choosing to ignore their squabble, Eleven poured herself a mug-full and took a sip. It was...good. *Really* good. Humming in pleasure, she only winced at the slight burn of alcohol on her bottom lip.

Max took notice and frowned. "So what happened there?"

"This? Oh, um..." Avoiding Billy's eyes, Eleven waved a hand. "I bit myself."

Max scoffed. "And is *that* why you bailed on us yesterday?"

"I wasn't feeling well."

"Okay, but you could've at least let us know where you went! You had Mike in a tizzy."

Billy rolled his eyes. "What, so you mean the stick bug was acting like El can't take care of herself? *There's* a surprise."

"Oh, give him a break! They were practically inseparable growing up." Max wasn't one to defend Mike, but there was a clear tension in the air, and she was nettled by whatever secret was being kept from her. Eleven always told her everything, so the rebuff was rather hurtful. What had changed?

Glancing her way, Max balked when she realized Eleven had drained her entire mug. "El, I *told* you! Take it slow!"

She hiccuped and clapped a hand over her mouth.

Billy chuckled, reaching inside the chip bag. "Breaking bad at last. Right, El?"

She blushed, looking in between them with uncertainty. "It was good, so..." Trailing off, she poured herself another mug-full and slid the bottle back into place.

"Guess I should've started charging for that," Max quipped. "Glad you like it though. It's been sitting at home collecting dust."

"Hmm?" Eleven looked at Max over the rim of her glass, to which the redhead laughed.

"There certainly aren't people like you across the world, that's for sure. All my travels could never bring me another you."

Billy cleared his throat then, finally appearing uncomfortable. "So, uh...you actually gave me a decent segue, so I'm just gonna go ahead and take it. I...I've been thinking about it, and I should probably go back to California soon."

Max and Eleven froze.

"What? Are you *serious*? Billy, we need your help!"

"I know, Maxie, but so does my boss. Things are getting pretty hectic back at the shop."

"So? People might actually *die* here! Can you really be that heartless?"

Eleven curled in on herself, feeling as though she'd swallowed lead as she took a generous sip of sake. Billy was leaving because of her. It *had* to be the reason, because prior to their kiss, he had seemed content to stay on and help.

Billy's snappish response to Max became lost on her, and after draining her second mug-full, Eleven soon felt floaty and detached from her body.

"El? *El*? Oh, shit. I *knew* she'd had too much!" Coming over to take the mug from her friend's hands, Max jerked slightly when Eleven tapped her nose.

"Pretty..."

Billy snorted. "Yep, she's *definitely* sloshed if she's calling *you* pretty."

Flipping him off, Max irritably straightened and said, "Dinner should be done by now, so I'll go ahead and check the steaks. The sooner we get food into El's stomach, the better."

Eleven slumped toward Billy, gazing up at him with wide, unfocused eyes. "Wow... Your eyelashes are *huge*."

"Yeah? Well, that's not the *only* huge part of my body."

"Ugh, you *Neanderthal*!" Making a face, Max opened the oven and looked at the tray, now poking the steaks with a fork. "They look done enough to me," she said. "I don't cook for just anybody, so consider this an honor. And I'm not a bad cook either, am I, El?"

"Hmm?" Eleven broke her intense gaze from Billy's pretty eyes. "No. I mean, yes. Yes, you aren't." She pulled herself up and tugged on Billy's sleeve to straighten herself.

Noting Eleven's weaving form, Max placed a steak onto a plate and set it down in front of her. "You. Eat. *Now*. Get something in your stomach, or you're going to be *super* hungover tomorrow."

While Max sat back down, she attempted small talk (as Billy rolled

his eyes), and Eleven tackled the impossible task of unfolding her napkin. Minutes seemed like hours as she tried to eat, but the food tasted far less pleasing to her palate than the sake. She took a few more gulps before Max took the bottle away.

"El, eat something *now!*"

"I'm eating, I'm *eating!*" Eleven snapped. She held her silverware aloft with a triumphant smile, but it tumbled from her grasp and made a clanging noise against her plate. She slumped over her steak, then Billy's lightning quick reflexes saved her from slicing her nose on the cutlery. She gripped his arm for support and pulled herself back into a sitting position.

"Take me to bed, Billy," she whispered, eyes round. "Take me..."

"I think she means put her to bed," Max clarified, sliding back her chair. "And that's probably not a bad idea. Come on, El-"

"No, I want Billy!" Eleven snapped, then jerked her head back, seemingly surprised at her own gumption. "I want Billy," she repeated, softer this time, her bottom lip petulant and full.

"Alright, *fine.*" Max raised her hands in a sarcastic attitude of surrender. "Go to bed with my nasty brother, see if I care." She shot Billy a warning look and waved them off.

As they moved toward her room, Eleven stumbled and leaned against him, her feet feeling like lead. "See, I'm not such a goodie-goodie now, am I?" she asked. "Oh Billy, I don't wanna be good... Show me how to be bad like you. I wanna be bad..."

She could hear his uneasy chuckle in the darkness as they made a path toward her bed. Eleven clapped her hands like a little girl while squealing, "Bed! Thas' my bed!"

They took a few steps forward and she placed her hand on his chest, stopping him. "Wait, be very quiet. The bed's moving! We have to sneak up on it!"

Billy gaped down at her, exasperated. "El, you're *completely-*"

"Shh!" She let him take her a few steps closer, then Eleven fell back onto the bed, gripping his shirt so that he plummeted with her. She gave a grunt with his full weight suddenly upon her, but continued to speak low and childlike, her eyes filled with trust and longing. "Stay with me, Billy. Don't go back to California. Stay here with me..." She pulled him close enough to rest her cheek against his. "Don't be mean to me, Billy. Not tonight. Be nice to me, because...because I love you."

Billy jerked, feeling as though a bucket of ice water had been dumped over his head. No grown woman had ever said that to him and meant it – no one except...

"Mom! Mom! Watch me, watch me!"

"I'm watching, sweetheart! I'll bet you can ride that wave!"

With his eyes burning, Billy furiously began prying Eleven's fingers from the collar of his shirt. "You don't know what the hell you're talking about – you're completely trashed," he snapped, muttering to himself. "Jesus, for such a small little thing, you've got an awfully strong grip. Let go!"

Eying Eleven's sleepy, dream-like face, Billy decided that she must be a little more tired than he thought. That would explain why she'd said those fervent (and untrue) things to him. "Just get some sleep, alright? You're gonna have a killer hangover in the morning, but it happens to the best of us."

"Don' leave me, Billy," Eleven whimpered. "Don't..."

Billy flinched at her words, his mind's eye conjuring up the image of little Max clinging desperately to his wrist.

"Don't leave me, Billy – oh, please don't leave! Dad will come back again..."

Swallowing the lump in his throat, Billy hardened his gaze and drew himself back up to his rightful height. "You don't need me here," he firmly said. "Just get some sleep. You'll thank me in the morning."

Max nearly careened into Billy as she entered Eleven's room. "Ah,

leaving so soon? You perverts work fast!" She peered over his shoulder and saw Eleven lying on the bed at an odd angle, her feet dangling over the side. "Oh, for goodness sake, Billy, couldn't you at least put her *inside* the bed? What's the matter, never tucked anyone in before?"

Max didn't wait for an answer. She was pulling Eleven up into a sitting position, holding her shoulders to steady her. "Here we go, El, time for bed!"

"I want Billy," Eleven sniveled.

"Forget Billy... Come on, lean on me while I unzip you." Eleven fell roughly against her friend's shoulder as she reached around to the back of her dress.

"But I love him, Max, I love him." Eleven's voice was muffled in the folds of her friend's soft jacket. She was no longer conscious of Billy being in the room, her eyes vacant and staring into Max's vibrant red hair.

"I get it, honey," Max assured her, her tone surprisingly gentle. "We often love the ones who hurt us the most. Now come on, shimmy-shimmy!" Eleven complied, child-like, rocking on her bottom until Max had pulled the mini-dress over her hips. She gathered the soft, supple material in her fists and was just about to pull it over Eleven's head when she noticed Billy standing in the doorway. She curled her lip at him. "What? Waiting for the floorshow, jerk?"

When Eleven caught the flash of his retreating form, she cried out and tried to stand, fighting against Max. "Don't be mean to him, don't make him leave!"

"Sit *down*, El!" Max wrestled her back to the bed, holding onto her flailing wrists. "Let him go, he's not worth this! Don't you *ever* make a fool of yourself over some man, you get me? Trust me on this one – it took me a *long* time to earn his affection. You don't need that in your life."

With Eleven's wrists bound in Max's grasp, she had the attitude of prayer as she peered sadly up at her friend. "Oh, but he needs me,

Max! He's all alone and doesn't have anybody but us... Me, I've got you and Joyce, and Will...but Billy doesn't have anybody! Just watch his face when he thinks no one is looking. Oh Max, it breaks my heart..." She surrendered herself to the sobs rising in her throat. "Don't let him leave, Max. He doesn't have to be near me... Oh, he hates me *so much*, and I don't know why, but he doesn't even have to look at me, just please make him stay..."

Max shook her head sadly. "El, you need help. This isn't like you at all! You didn't react nearly this badly when Mike broke up with you, so you need to get it together!"

"I'm *tired* of holding it together!" Eleven snapped, jerking free of Max's grasp. "I'm tired of people telling me how to behave or what to take care of, or who to love!"

Max stared helplessly at her a moment, then pulled back the bed covers. "Well, let's see how much you still love Billy in the morning, hmm? I promise to keep the lunatic in the asylum for one more night."

"Just don't be mean to him," Eleven whimpered, meekly sliding beneath the covers and pulling them up to her chin.

"You know I won't," Max promised. She flicked off the bedside lamp and started for the door.

"Oh, and Max...?" Eleven's voice reached her through the darkness, sounding small and fragile. "Do you promise not to tell anyone?"

She gave a derisive snort. "Trust me, El, I'd rather *forget* that you have the hots for my brother. Just go to sleep... As in *now*."

Max walked back into the kitchen then, where she found Billy hurriedly slipping into his jacket. She crossed her arms and glared at him. "Hold it right there, Casanova – just where do you think you're going?"

Flexing his hands, Billy re-adjusted his collar before turning around. "Back to California, like I said."

"*Now?*" Scoffing, Max shook her head. "You're fucking unbelievable,

you know that? I mean, were you going to tell me that you and El have a thing, or was I supposed to find out thanks to too much sake?"

Billy clenched his jaw. "It's *not* 'a thing.'"

"Yeah? Well maybe you'd better tell *El* that, because she seems to have some pretty strong feelings on the matter."

"She's *drunk*, Max. And confused."

"Or maybe, *just* maybe, you've finally found someone capable of loving your stubborn ass."

Billy stormed toward her then, viciously pointing a finger in her face. "Get the *fuck* out of our business."

"I will not! She's my best friend, and you're my brother!" Expression softening, Max reached out and took hold of his finger, gently guiding it back down to his side. "Billy, in all my years of friendship with Eleven, I've never seen her act like this with anybody else, not even Mike. If Hopper were still alive, he'd just send her off to Alabama to see a family friend, or something – *anything* to get her the hell away from you. But I'm not her dad, and I can't make her pain go away, but apparently *you leaving* is going to make her worse off than she already has been all these years." Max shrugged. "So yeah, I know you think it's not your problem, and that she's some big bother to you now, but she became your problem the minute you spent the night with her."

Billy scoffed. "What are you, my mom? We didn't *do* anything, Max!"

"Hey, I don't care, alright? I just want you to realize that that girl in there is my *best fucking friend*, meaning that I will fucking *tear you apart* if you hurt her." She jabbed her finger against his chest. "You got me?"

Billy swallowed, his eyes glassy. "Yeah, I got you."

Max nodded. "We need you, Billy – *I* need you. *El* needs you. Don't just run off into the night like a coward...stay here with us." Taking his hand, she gave it a gentle squeeze.

Knock. Knock. Knock.

"Shit..." Max released Billy's hand and peered through the peephole. "Oh shit, it's Mike and Lucas..." Ripping open the door, she looked between them with concern. "What's wrong? Why did-?"

"We've got a *big* problem," Mike said. "Go get El."

Billy stepped forward then, frowning. "She's currently incapacitated, so-"

"It got Will."

"What?"

"And Jonathan and Nancy, too...or at least, that's what we think."

Max looked to Billy, wide-eyed. "But...how? What proof do you have?"

"None for now," Lucas admitted, "but nobody can locate them. Joyce can't find them either, and her mother's intuition is going haywire."

Billy scoffed. "No offense to her 'mother's intuition' or anything, but-"

"Nobody asked you!" Mike seethed. "My best friend has probably been flayed *yet again*, so you need to wake El up *right now* so that we can help him!"

"Listen here, you little shit – El is *drunk*, so if you want her to get sick all over your candy-assed little sweater, then-"

"Alright, that's enough!" Frustrated, Max stepped in between them. "First thing's first: Lucas, we need to go get Dustin. Second, we're all going to stock up on weapons. Third, we're going to go look for this motherfucker and finish it once and for all."

Lucas grinned. "Would it be inappropriate to say I am so turned on right now?"

Billy made a face. "For the sake of my sanity, yeah, I'd say that's *real* fucking inappropriate, dickweed." He motioned to the door. "Go get

your friend. I'll stay here with El."

Max smiled gratefully. "You really mean it?"

"Yeah, I mean it. Go on." He looked between them. "Let's get this sonofabitch."

A/N: Things I've learned while writing this chapter:

1) El is a fangirl who writes fanfiction (i.e. an AU of what happened in the bathroom scene).

2) El is an emotional drunk.

3) I REALLY LOVE MAX.

4) All of my favorite musicals fit my ships in some way, and I drown in feels every time I listen to them. For instance, "Bad Idea" from the Waitress soundtrack is totally Bileven, as well as "Word of Your Body" from Spring Awakening. 10/10 recommend for pain lol.

Also, I can't remember if I mentioned it last chapter or not, but I made a Billy/El vid called "the reason I felt alive" (username KendraLuehr on YT) if anyone wants to check it out! It's fluffy and very AU.

Anyway, this was a super fun chapter for me to write (and I'm surprised I got it finished so quickly, tbh), and I think this fic will probably be finished relatively soon? Maybe 2-4 more chapters, I'm guessing? NOT SURE IF I'M READY TO SAY GOODBYE TO IT YET, TBH, BECAUSE I'VE BEEN REALLY ENJOYING MYSELF. I haven't had this much fun fic-writing in years, so THANK YOU for fueling me! :)

INDIVIDUAL THANKS:

Kara: Haha yes, finally! xD I was beginning to think it'd never happen! And I know, the poor Byers family just can't catch a break. :/

Shian1998: LOL yeah. Sadly, years of abuse make it a bit hard for someone to stop being a jerk, so I'm trying my best to make the transition smooth. I think he's starting to (slowly) come around though. :)

madscientistproduction.01: Haha aww, I'm sorry! I definitely know those feels, lol, cuz it's only fun being on the delivering end of it. :P Billy will (eventually) accept a hug. Maybe sooner than you (and I, admittedly) think!

fanficscool: Ahh, thanks, glad you think so! And yeah, haha, I think I've only written a love triangle like...twice, and I was 14 at the time. xD Definitely not my typical scene lol. And as complicated as Billy/El already are, they definitely don't need a love triangle thrown into the mix! Glad you enjoyed. :)

8. Give Me Shelter

Sexual content warning.

CH 8: Give Me Shelter

Billy stood vigilant by Eleven's bed, chainsmoking while he watched her sleep. She looked so small and vulnerable...yet *happy*. The realization made his chest ache with nerves, but he couldn't bring himself to leave. He knew Eleven had meant every word she'd said – *friends don't lie* – and perhaps that was what terrified him most of all.

Wiping a hand over his mouth, Billy sighed through his nose and shook his head. What the hell was the matter with him? Was he really going to stay? Was he *seriously* contemplating the idea of-?

"Billy..."

He froze, looking down just as Eleven curled up into a ball, her knees hugging toward her chest as she smiled dreamily. She was still fast asleep. The way she'd spoken his name, so soft and hopeful, felt like a shot of warm whiskey in his stomach. Billy didn't want to dwell on that.

Cigarette dangling between his lips, he leaned over and held out a hand, hesitating only a moment before touching her hair. It was soft – much like her. When he'd grabbed her hair in the bathroom, it had been a cruel, savage act, so it almost felt *wrong* now that he could experience this without her awareness.

"Sorry," he whispered. "I'm such a..." *Jerk. Asshole. Fucking screw-up.*

With tears in his eyes, he stroked his fingers down the curve of her cheek. Eleven was pretty. He'd never really allowed himself to dwell on the fact before, seeing how he'd known her for so long, but now with the gentle rise and fall of her chest and her soft, angelic features, he found he could no longer ignore it.

"Those are bad..."

Jerking his hand back in alarm, it took Billy a moment to realize she

was referring to the cigarette between his lips. Chuckling, he nodded. "Yeah...I know." He smiled more openly then, his eyes crinkling warmly around the edges. "How're you feeling? You were really shit-faced."

With a kittenish sigh, Eleven rolled over onto her back and rubbed her eyes. She felt groggy and disoriented, but otherwise, it was almost as if nothing had happened. Except...

Wide-eyed, she looked up at him in horror. "Oh, no." Eleven clapped a hand over her mouth. "Did we...? Did *I*...? Oh *God*, I told you I love you!"

"Yeah, that was pretty fucking dumb," Billy agreed, though there was a softness around his eyes.

"Are you...a-are you mad at me?"

He scoffed. "Why would I be mad? I've definitely had worse things said to me, and they usually involved me being called a 'worthless faggot,' so really – it's fine."

Eleven lowered her eyes, twisting her hands self-consciously. "Where's Max? Did she go home?"

"Sorta..." Hesitant, Billy extinguished his cigarette before setting it onto a makeshift ashtray. "I should actually talk to you about that."

"Who, Max?"

"No." Slowly sinking onto the bed alongside her, Billy sighed and kneaded the comforter in between his fingers. "The mindflayer got Will...and apparently, Nancy and Jonathan, too."

"*What?*"

"Mike and Lucas wanted to take you to find the mindflayer, but Max and I wouldn't let them. Not yet."

Struggling to process this bit of news, Eleven dazedly shook her head. "Where are they now?"

"Regrouping and getting weapons. I said I'd stay here with you."

"Why?"

"Because..." He shrugged, appearing helpless. "I dunno... Maybe it's because this could be our last night together."

Eleven looked up at him fearfully, feeling a spark of panic in her chest. "Why would you ever say that?"

"I almost died the last time," he reminded her. "Really, it's not that surprising to think-"

"Don't." Eleven's eyes were wet and sorrowful. "*Don't* say that." She moved to sit up, but that was when she remembered she was only wearing a bra and panties. She held the blankets up in front of her a moment, flustered, before suddenly realizing that she didn't care. Eleven *wanted* Billy to see her. She had already seen his every scar, tragic memory and flaw, so what harm was a little humility of her own?

Allowing the blankets to slip from her fingers, she watched Billy's eyes widen before he attempted to look elsewhere. She appreciated the respect, but it wasn't what she wanted.

"Billy..." Laying a hand over his, she gently squeezed his fingers. "You're right," she whispered. "Maybe we *don't* have beyond tonight, and I...I don't want to spend it worrying."

Billy's brow creased. Staring down at their hands with unease, he slowly shook his head. "Trust me, El, you don't want-"

"I *do*. And I have for a long, long time." Reaching up with her free hand, she cupped his cheek and turned his head to face her. His eyes were still so haunted and sad. "I know you think no one could ever want you, Billy, but you're wrong. *I* want you, and *I* need you, and you've completely ruined me for anyone else."

A choking laugh caught in Billy's throat and he shook his head. His chin quivered and then his eyes were shining, and before Eleven knew what was happening, he'd sagged against her and pressed his forehead into hers. Both her hands cupped his cheeks, and then he

was crying. The ugly, tortured sounds coming from his throat were reminiscent of a wounded soldier – of a man who'd fought battle after battle, and was finally ready to come home.

"El," he whispered, pressing a hand to her cheek.

Tearfully, she nodded. "I know," she whispered back. Embracing him, she nudged her cheek into his and gently rocked him in her arms, her heart breaking when his tears dampened her neck. His lips brushed her pulse then and she jerked, melting into his touch as she tilted her head to allow him better access. So many thought of Billy as a terrible person – a *monster* – but the teeth that grazed her skin didn't belong to a ruthless creature. He was uncharacteristically *gentle* as he handled her, and something inside her fractured at the feeling of his lips on her skin.

Finally, finally, finally.

Skimming her fingers beneath the hem of his shirt, Eleven lifted her head and met with Billy's eyes. His hard edges suddenly appeared soft in this light – muted, yet impassioned. He'd always felt too much, she decided, but he'd channeled those feelings into violence and aggression since it was all he'd ever known.

"I can stop," he promised. "Please, El, there's still time to-"

She pressed a finger to his lips, watching the way fear kept dancing across his eyes like blitzing, crackling fireworks. He was afraid to love. He was *afraid* to let down his walls, and with this newfound vulnerability, he finally seemed to realize how open and raw she'd left him.

Don't draw back again, she inwardly begged. ***Please don't pull away from me.***

For once, he listened.

Gripping at her shoulders, Billy slid his hands into Eleven's hair and urged his mouth over hers. His breath caught between their kiss and he trembled, unaccustomed to touch that wasn't violent. Even when he fucked, things were violent – he'd never had soft and warm and

safe, and his stomach rolled over with nausea at how badly he wanted this – at how badly he wanted *her*.

"El," he feebly pleaded. "I..."

"Yeah," she whispered into their kiss. "Me, too."

Eleven moved astride his hips, and Billy carefully accommodated her, holding fast to her slim form as their kiss grew more bruising. He heard her whimper, and then she removed her soaked panties and tossed them to the floor, his pulse thrumming as he withdrew long enough to assess her gaze. Her stare electrified him. Gently brushing his thumb across her lips, he kissed the corner of her mouth and slid a hand between her legs, his breath hitching as he rocked his palm against her heat. "Tell me if you want me to stop," he warned.

Stubbornly, Eleven shook her head. "No, I won't want you to stop – not ever."

Her eyes fell shut as Billy's palm finally found where she felt empty – the space she so desperately needed him to fill. She moved against him, trying to coax his fingers further into her wetness, and then she cried out, shuddering when he was fully inside her. She was so worked up that she wanted to cry. With his fingers flexing deep inside her heat, and his...*God*, his thumb rubbing her clit, she could barely think straight. She felt like shimmering light in his palms.

Lowering his mouth to her neck, Billy burned a trail of kisses across her shivering skin, his touch warm and eager as he felt Eleven clench and spasm around his driving fingers. He thrust more deeply into her small orgasm, cupping her face as he pulled back to watch each flicker of emotion cross her eyes. She let out a high-pitched, throaty whine as she closed down tight around him, and then her whole body trembled as she came undone for him and him alone.

As soon as he pulled away, Eleven felt the absence.

"Please," she begged. Somehow, seeing the heated flush of Billy's skin was wholly satisfying. Not because *she* had been the cause, but because in that moment, he seemed genuinely sated. That was all she had ever wanted for him – to fill his emptiness with something warm,

tangible, and complete.

Now framing his hips with her thighs, Eleven cupped Billy's face and repeated, "*Please.*"

Billy could feel her shaking. Gently, he nuzzled into her cheek and held her close, now pulling his arousal free of his pants with calloused, shaking fingers. Nodding to her, he encouraged her to lower herself until she was grinding against him. His breath caught, and then she was pushing downward, slowly coercing his cock inside her until he was gripping her waist harshly enough to bruise, his teeth clenching as she slid down to the hilt. Eleven was so wet and *tight* that his head began to spin. "Fuck," he whispered.

She wriggled around, making him groan as she attempted to get comfortable. He could tell the stretch was deep, given the way she gasped and arched, and her breasts heaved as she clawed at his clothed back. Now reaching for her chin, Billy tilted her head back and brought their lips together, beginning to carefully jerk his hips in offering as she rode him. Licking at her mouth, he softly groaned into the kiss and used his touch to guide her, propelling her with his hands so that he pushed her repeatedly into his lap. Anytime she came down, he jerked upward, attempting to deepen her pleasure. He moved one hand to her cheek and broke the kiss, pressing their foreheads together as he searched her eyes. He'd wanted to say he cared, but his throat had ultimately closed around the words. With women, expressing genuine affection had never been easy, but Eleven was the first – the absolute *first* – to garner such a strong need in him to love.

Eleven melted into his touch. She let Billy guide her into a steady rhythm, instinctively tightening around him each time he pushed up inside her, letting out shuddering breaths as she clutched his shoulders. Her own fingers found her clit then and she rubbed lightly, gasping at the increased sensation.

While Eleven mimicked his pace, her head tossed and Billy pressed his face into her neck, encouraging her to grind down into his lap as he worked himself inside her nice and deep. She continued to rub herself, so he pushed her hand away, now biting down on her shoulder as he rubbed and tweaked her sensitive clit in her place. He

could feel her walls prematurely spasm as she rolled down into his thrusts. "That's it," he encouraged. "You're almost there..."

He clenched his jaw, now mentally steeling himself so that he wouldn't cum before she did. Slumping downward, he edged her into the mattress, still using all of his body weight to channel into his aggressive thrusts. He seized a handful of her hair and yanked so that she was forced to look him in the eye, his mouth sliding over hers in a messy, ardent kiss that was all teeth and tongue.

Each movement brought Eleven up off the mattress, and their shared cries caught between their lips as she continued to clench and throb around him. "Billy," she whispered, trembling. "I...I..."

He growled at her, feeling her thighs twitch and quiver. "El..." He licked her mouth. "Baby, I need you to cum."

Eleven shuddered. She could feel his warm, pulsing cock right against her spot and she was so, so ready for him, more sensitive than she'd ever been, rolling her hips up hard and fast, every thrust sending her into euphoria as she moaned into his mouth. Her movements were getting needier and desperate. She wanted this, *needed* this – needed to feel Billy inside her and fucking her like he couldn't help himself. She wanted more – harder and faster, she wanted it to hurt – *anything* to keep him feeling again.

That was when he could no longer hold back. Falling heavily against her, Billy bit down on her shoulder and growled against her skin, her pleas growing hysterical as he moved to devour them with his lips. His body arched and grew taut with need, and then his head tossed as he emptied himself with several sharp, excited spasms. Eleven cried out from the overstimulation. Wrapping her arms around his shoulders, she arched just as she tightened around him in sharp, shuddering waves.

Fuck.

With a low groan, Billy kissed his way from her shoulder to the crook of her neck, nuzzling into her cheek as he panted shallowly. Meeting with her gaze, he pressed a soft kiss to her throat and teased her clit with his fingertips, feeling her spasm one final time as they laid there

gasping. He continued to arch and grind against her body, breathless as he kept himself buried deep between her thighs. "Are you...?" He struggled for breath, still tracing patterns across her skin. "Are you alright? Was that okay?"

Eleven beamed, catching her bottom lip between her teeth as she cupped his cheek. She could watch his face as he came a thousand times and never get tired of it, ultimately getting to see the heaviness melt away and his large, tired eyes brighten as she touched him – a relief from all the demons inside his head. She *liked* being able to soothe him in that way. It wasn't much, but it was something.

Slowly disengaging, Billy rolled alongside her and exhaled. Eleven had never quite answered his questions, but her bright, sated smile had been enough. Moving to tuck himself back into his pants, his hands continued to shake as he attempted to straighten his appearance.

"Bitchin'."

"What?"

"You asked how it was...and it was bitchin'."

When he looked over at her, he caught sight of her grin and a low, throaty chuckle rumbled deep in his chest. "Yeah? Well, was it bitchin' enough for an encore?"

Eleven blinked at him, startled. "What, you mean like...right *now*?"

"Sure, why not? No time like the present."

She snorted. "No offense, but most of the guys I've been with couldn't last another thirty seconds."

"Yeah, but I'm not 'most guys.'"

Eleven giggled, disbelief coloring her face as she shook her head.

Billy responded by playfully wrestling her underneath him, her shrieks of laughter filling the tiny room as he made an effort to prove his stamina.

"I don't think we should go in there..."

Mike whirled away from Will's front door, frustrated. "Don't be such a pussy, Dustin! If Will went missing, it means it probably happened here in this house!"

Looking down at the welcome mat with unease, Dustin noticed how crooked and off-kilter it was, almost as if someone had been shoved (or *dragged*) inside. "Um...guys?"

"You have a gun," Max irritably reminded him. "If you find a need to use it, just go ahead and take the shot."

"Okay, *not* helpful. The only weapons I've fired are the pixelated kind."

Lucas sighed. "Can we just go *in*, already?"

Mike was already way ahead of them. After discovering that the door was unlocked, he'd crept inside and was instantly stricken by the cold, and the... "Holy shit."

"What?" Dustin appeared at his side, only to balk at the sight of the flayed, torn wall. "Holy shit...an entrance to the Upside Down!"

"Let's go in."

"Mike, are you *crazy*?"

"What? Like Max said, we've got our guns."

"And our *brains* too, last time I checked! We don't know what's in there!"

"You can stay here and keep watch," Max suggested. "That way, if something *does* show up, you can scream like the little bitch you are and warn us."

"Hey, fuck you! I don't have life insurance!"

Placing his flashlight between his teeth, Mike took hold of the sliced

wall and began to pull. It gave way with little resistance, peeling back to reveal the terrifying world they'd all grown to fear. A cold, chilling breeze washed over them then, and Mike steeled himself before pushing his way inside.

"Oh, shit," Dustin swore. "You guys, this is crazy!"

"Stay here," Lucas snapped. "We'll be right back."

Before Dustin could protest, the trio had already pushed through the crack and entered the Upside Down. The area was cold – *quiet* – much like the air after a snowfall.

With his heart in his throat, Mike gripped his flashlight and crept through the goo and webbing with slow, careful footsteps. That was when he heard a chitter.

"Will?"

Turning toward the noise, he blanched at the sight of three cocooned bodies.

Max thudded into his shoulder, horrorstricken. "It's them!" she cried. To Lucas, she added, "Go and see if they're alive."

"Who, me? No way!"

Mike moved toward the cocoons and immediately tore into the first one. He ripped at the sticky seams with shaking, clumsy fingers, and his eyes stung once his sister's face came into view. "Nancy!"

She was pale and unmoving, but alive...he could see the steady jump of her pulse in her throat. Turning to his friends, Mike pleaded, "Help me with them! We need to get them out of here!"

Billy laid stretched out with Eleven tucked beneath his chin, a hand in her hair as the fan turned in slow, lazy circles overhead.

"What is this, anyway?"

Following her gaze down toward his tattoo, Billy shrugged and

shifted to get more comfortable. "What's it look like?"

"I dunno...I always thought it was a skull with a fishing hook in its mouth."

"*Seriously?*"

"No, really!" Gently tracing her finger along the faded ink, Eleven said, "See? It's shaped like a hook."

"It's a *cigarette*, genius."

She scoffed. "Yeah, okay. Because a smoking skull makes *so* much more sense."

"Okay, well what would *you* have gotten then? I was young and ready to stick it to the man, so it seemed like my best option."

"I don't...I-I don't think I'd want one." Eleven began to absently rub at her wrist, and Billy frowned when he caught sight of the worn *011* on her skin. He remembered her telling him about it...about how her "Papa" had branded her.

"Tats aren't for everyone," Billy mumbled. "For some, it's an expression...maybe you could get something tattooed over top of that."

Eleven blinked down at her wrist, clearly not having considered that option. "Like what?"

"I dunno...maybe flowers or some shit?"

She smiled, a fondness touching her eyes as she traced the brand. "I'd have to think about it. Maybe I could do something for Hop...like a memorial bracelet."

Billy chewed his lip. He'd never really been close to anyone in the way she'd been with Hopper – her *real* father – but even so, he gave her a gentle squeeze around the shoulders. "He'd probably like that."

Eleven laughed. "No, he definitely wouldn't. I think he would've freaked if I'd gotten a tattoo as a kid." Grinning, she curled over into

Billy's side. "Maybe I can finally be a rebel like you."

He scoffed. "What, at age twenty-four? Yeah...*super* rebellious."

"Oh, c'mon! I've always been a bit of a late bloomer."

Billy moved to respond, but the front door opened (Max had a key), and an outbreak of voices followed.

Eleven immediately sat up. "Oh, shit..."

"El? Hey El, we've gotta talk to you!"

Flustered, Eleven threw Billy's shirt in his face and frantically searched for her clothes. Somehow, her bra had gotten flung toward the edge of the bed (things *had* gotten rather heated during their second round), and just as she reached for it, the unlocked door swung open, and their four friends swarmed into the room.

Everyone froze. Then all at once, a flurry of responses registered.

"Ho-ho-hoooooly shit!" Dustin crowed.

Seizing her bra, Eleven squeaked and promptly dove back under the covers. Billy (naturally) didn't feel any need to respond, a smug grin filling his face as he relaxed into the bedding.

Lucas was unabashedly leering at the scene, and Max took the opportunity to smack him. "Cut that out, you dillhole!"

"Ow!" Irritably rubbing his arm, he moved to snipe back when Mike viciously shoved past him.

"El, *seriously?*" he growled. "We're under attack again, and all you can think about is...is *screwing around?*"

Billy shrugged. "What can I say? She has excellent taste."

"I'm not talking to you!" Mike spat. To Eleven, he pleaded, "We need your help, El. We went to Will's house just now, and we found everyone. They're all out in the car waiting for you."

Still half-burrowed under the sheets, Eleven lifted her head at this bit of news. "Are they alright?"

"They're still unconscious, but yes. We think the mindflayer was trying to like...*clone* them or something, but we're not really sure."

Eleven frowned. "What do you need me to do?"

"I dunno...look at them, maybe? See if you can coax the mindflayer out of hiding? It was after you the last time, so I thought-"

"Are you fucking serious?" Billy cut in. "You're not using her as bait, shithead!"

"And who asked for *your* opinion, asshole?"

"Alright, enough!" Agitated, Eleven clung to her sheet and looked between her friends. "I'll take a look at them. The mindflayer was drawn to *everyone* this time around, so we might not even have to bait it at all."

The front door swung open again, and everyone perked up.

"Hey, hey, sorry I'm late!" a familiar voice called. "I got held up at the 7-11, and I...holy *shit*."

"Steve?" With a mortified screech, Eleven yanked the covers up over her head. "Why are you here?!"

"Uhhh..." He blinked, now looking around him with discomfort. "Dustin invited me, so...should I come back later? Is now not a good time?"

Eleven groaned and sagged against Billy's shoulder. "Could you all *please* just go into the kitchen? I want to get dressed!"

"Don't have to tell me twice," Mike muttered.

One by one, everyone began filing out of the room, and Max closed the door behind them with a *simper*.

Once they were finally alone again, Billy started laughing.

"It's *not* funny."

"Yeah? Well I beg to differ. The stick bug finally got to see your tits, so *that* must've been a nice surprise for him."

Eleven scoffed, flushing as she slipped into her bra. "What makes you think he hasn't already?" Catching Billy's annoyed look, she grinned and began hunting for her panties.

"I don't want you doing anything stupid."

"What?"

"Those dipshits...they want you to risk your life again."

"Yeah..." Rolling her lips inward, Eleven grabbed her underwear off the floor and began stepping into them. "We seem to have things in control this time around, so-"

"I don't care."

Looking over her shoulder, she was startled by the fear and hurt boiling behind Billy's eyes.

"I'm used to being ditched, El, but I'm *not* gonna go through it this time. I won't let you walk out on me, too. I just...I just *won't*. And I can't let you do something so fucking dumb now that I've *finally*..."

"Yeah," she whispered, teary-eyed, "I know." Crawling over to him across the bed, Eleven took him in her arms and edged her cheek into his hair.

"This is so fucked," Billy whispered, trembling.

Eleven nodded, tears spilling down her cheeks. "Most love is."

"*Don't* say you love me again."

"But I do, Billy..."

He chuckled, clinging to her more tightly. "Then I guess we're *both* fucked."

Pressing a kiss to his temple, she reached down and took hold of his hand, much like she'd done all those years ago. Feebly, he squeezed her fingers.

A/N: WOW, this took forever, I'm so sorry! I tend to be very slow with love scenes, because I want them to be as perfect as I can get them, and with these two? Yeah. It was HARD. For the longest time, I couldn't even get them to kiss. It was like OKAY, GUYS, ANY MINUTE NOW, but a few days ago, everything finally clicked and I THINK it's finally okay now. lol Also, shout-out to BundyShoes for the "bitchin'" idea, bwuaha, I really enjoyed throwing that in there. Anyway, there's just one more chapter to go! I'm both sad and relieved, because I honestly didn't think I'd be able to write this. The concept seemed a bit difficult for me at first, and yet here we are, a little over a month later!

P.S. Steve is actually my favorite character, so I knew I'd probably have to throw him in at some point! I wrote a crossover fic with him back in like 2017, but I don't think it was really read since...well...it's a crossover. lol I know people don't like those, but I'm a sucker for combining worlds. Anywhos, I figured El would react the strongest to him seeing her in bed, because I headcanon that he became like her big brother after Hopper died. It'd definitely be embarrassing for them!

P.P.S. I realized that the fan mix I'd made (and mentioned in CH 5) was accidentally listed as private, so it's available now!

INDIVIDUAL THANKS:

Kara: Haha yes, I loved writing protective!Max. THE FRIEND WE ALL DESERVE. And haha yes, Billy was definitely (finally) on board! ;) Thanks so much!

Shian1998: LOL yep! My friend lived in Japan for a few years, and sake gets you hammered very quickly. It's why I went with it, because I wanted her sudden inebriation to be realistic. The mindflayer bits are the hardest parts for me, so I'm nervous about tying it all up!

Mr. One-Shots: OHMYGOD, I actually didn't think of that? But that'd be hilarious, hahaha. But sadly, no! Eleven cleared up pretty well, all

things considered, so she'll be sober for the final battle. Fortunately.
:P

madscientistproduction.01: LOL drunk!El was surprisingly fun to write. I never thought I would've written something like this a year ago, and yet here I am. xD

fanficscool: Ahh, thank you, that's always the best compliment to hear! ;^; I'm sad to see it end too, if only because I love hearing from you guys, and I love writing these characters! But I foresee only one more chapter, so it's sadly almost done!

thetruthisavirus: Thank you so much! :) It took me a week lol, but it's finally almost done!

9. Forever Bound

CH 9: Forever Bound

The room was tense and quiet. Eleven sat at the kitchen table, pink-cheeked and looking down into a glass of milk as everyone sat around her – or *tried* to. There hadn't been enough chairs, so Steve had gratefully volunteered to be the odd man out. He stood over by the counter, arms crossed as he anxiously looked between everyone.

"So, uh...are we going to get to kicking monster ass soon, or? 'Cause I've got a *huge* day ahead of me tomorrow, and if I don't get home by midnight, I-"

"You'll what? Turn into a pumpkin?" Rolling his eyes, Billy muttered, "You'll be *fine*, dipshit."

The room fell silent once more.

Guiltily, Eleven looked to Mike. "I'm sorry that I couldn't wake them up...I'm not sure what happened, but it looks like they might be stuck like that for a while."

Billy frowned. "You're a telekinetic, not a doctor. I dunno why *dumbass* over there figured you could wake them up."

"Well it was worth a shot, wasn't it?" Mike fumed. "If any one of us could do it, it's El!"

"We need to draw it out," Max agreed. "The mindflyer clearly wants us, so it'll come."

"Wait, how do you figure?" Lucas asked. "Why does it want *all* of us and not just El?"

"Because it came to us in our dreams. If it didn't want something from us as a group, it'd just be going after El."

"Okay," Dustin agreed, "but I still don't get the dreams and the cocoons... What the hell is it *doing*?"

"Cloning," Billy whispered. Everyone turned to look at him then, shocked, and he fearfully raised his head. "When I first encountered that thing, it appeared to me as *myself*. That fucker must be trying to create another army, but this time using our doppelgangers."

"Holy shit," Dustin swore. "Holy *shit*. Do you mean...?"

"Yeah," Billy cut in, nodding, "we're going to have to fight ourselves."

Steve breathed a nervous laugh. "Okay, soooo...*not* getting home by midnight? Gotcha."

Billy ignored him. "Let's go back to Starcourt. It's been abandoned since '85, so nobody should give us any trouble."

"Uhh, PTSD much?" Steve complained. "Why can't we try someplace new, like that hill where Dustin got such a great signal?"

"Yeah," Billy sardonically said, "let's all go up to a barren-ass hill where we'll be *wide open* and vulnerable. *Great* plan, Harrington."

"It's better than going back to a Russian-owned mall!"

"The Russians are gone."

"And how would *you* know? You left for California not long after!"

"Alright, cool it!" Max snapped. "Billy's right. Our safest bet is Starcourt, because it'll give us a place to hide, *and* we won't have to worry about civilian casualties."

Lucas huffed. "For the record, I consider *us* civilians, so let's not go getting our asses killed."

"Let's go," Mike agreed. "If the mindflayer wants us that badly, it'll follow us anywhere."

Under the table, Eleven squeezed Billy's hand. Tears filled her eyes and she nodded. "We have to stop it...we can't just...w-we can't just keep letting people get hurt."

Billy looked over at her then, feeling his stomach dip. "That's *not* your

responsibility."

"It *is*. I invited it in...I allowed it to stay. But no more." She looked to Steve with determination. "Can we use your car?"

"Oh, uh...I mean, sure. It seats about eight, so we should be good to go."

Billy scoffed. "Harrington, do you drive a fucking *minivan*?"

Steve bristled. "I'm a gym teacher! Sometimes I take my students on fieldtrips, *asshole*."

Mike was already headed for the door. "C'mon, quit swinging your dicks and get moving! Nancy and Will and Jonathan might not have much time left!"

Everyone rose to leave, but Billy lingered behind. Looking to Eleven, he earnestly touched her hand. "Remember your promise," he pleaded.

She looked up at him with pained eyes. "Don't do anything stupid," she agreed, nodding.

Pulling her into his arms, he tucked her head beneath his chin and kissed her hair. "Damn right, you won't."

Closing her eyes, Eleven burrowed against his chest and trembled. He smelled like comfort – he smelled like *home* – and guiltily, she found herself wishing they could just stay like that forever.

"God, what a piece of shit..."

"Easy on the clutch, asshole!" The suspension strained, and then the group of seven went careening forward, mercifully being saved by their seatbelts. Annoyed, Steve shouted toward the front, "Use less gas next time! It's not a sports car!"

Billy flashed him a "no shit" look in the rearview mirror. "Wow, *really*? No *wonder* you're in charge of this town's education system. Hawkins needs things done a bit more *slowly* than the rest of the

world."

The minivan jolted again, and Eleven laid a comforting hand on Steve's arm. "Thank you for letting him drive. I can tell he's nervous, so he needed the distraction."

Posture softening, Steve looked down at her with a strained smile. "And how are *you* holding up?"

She blinked at that, unsure of how to properly answer. She was scared, she was nervous, she was *exhausted*, and yet her affection for the broken man in the driver's seat kept her alert and hopeful. Finally, she squeezed Steve's arm and smiled. "I'm alright."

"Just alright?"

"Are *you* better than alright?"

"Okay, fair point..." Sighing, Steve slung an arm around Eleven's shoulders.

Grateful to the tactile comfort, she curled into his side and laid her head on his shoulder. After Hopper had died, Steve had stepped in like a surrogate brother of sorts, and they'd spent many days sitting in this exact same manner, silent and offering support in the only way they knew how.

"Your boyfriend's a douche."

Wrinkling her nose, Eleven lifted her eyes and smiled. "He might hear you..."

"Good. I hope he *does*."

"He's not a douche...not once you get to know him."

Faltering, Steve looked back over toward Billy, whose eyes were clouded and distant as he drove. "Is that why you fell for him? Because of the hidden layers?"

Eleven shrugged. "I don't know...I think I've always loved him a little. He has those hurt, wild eyes that try to repel others, but I wasn't

scared 'cause I had those eyes too."

"A couple of snarling strays," Steve lowly agreed, "except you were just skittish... Billy would rather take your fucking hand off than admit any sign of gratitude."

"But he *is* grateful," Eleven murmured. "I can tell..." Staring out at the glittering twilight, she was reminded of sugar-spun sunsets and dizzying carnival rides – of freedom and laughter and the feeling of being weightless, *untethered*. She wanted to share that with Billy. She wouldn't die, because she *needed* to show him that life was beautiful.

Max looked back at her then and their eyes locked, a communal smile forming between them. The car was still filled with soft, nervous chatter, but in that moment, Eleven felt whole. This was her *family*, and she would fight tooth and nail to keep them safe.

By the time they arrived at Starcourt, the skies were black and foreboding. Nobody said a word as they walked through the parking lot, solemn and stone-faced, and the silence continued long after they'd found the emergency switch and turned on the lights. They flickered, sputtered, and then illuminated the fallen mall with a sickly yellow.

In spite of their dire situation, Dustin grinned. "This is *so cool*. Have you guys ever seen those dystopian movies? It makes me think of-

"Shh!" Holding up a hand, Eleven canted her head and listened, her pulse quickening as the lights continued to spark and throb. There was a soft, indistinct chittering, and when she looked over at Billy, she realized that he was perspiring faintly.

Placing a hand over his bicep, she gave a lurch when the lights dimmed and revealed to them seven blank-faced, dead-eyed copies of themselves. When they all locked eyes with their doppelgangers, the clones grinned wickedly.

"Holy shit," Dustin swore. "I think...I-I think I might've pissed myself."

Only the sound of their breathing followed, and then the clone of

Eleven roared and thrust a tentacle-like arm forward. It sailed past Max's ear and smashed through a Foot Locker window.

"Move!" Billy shouted.

Stunned into clumsy action, the group splintered and began searching for shelter.

"This was such a bad idea," Lucas whined. "Even if we use our guns, we might shoot *ourselves* instead of the clones!"

Fearfully, Max ducked down alongside her husband. "We have to try," she said. "If we don't, we'll die for sure!"

A crash erupted from upstairs, and both covered their heads as glass rained down around them. Swearing softly, Lucas grabbed Max's arm, and the two began skulking back toward the vending machines.

"I'm going to make a break for that sports shop," he whispered. "There are bats and golf clubs in there, so I can get us some safer weapons."

Max looked to him in horror. "Don't...it'll leave you wide open!"

"Well, it's just like you said: we'll die if we don't try." Pressing a hand to her cheek, he pulled her in for a quick kiss before whispering, "Stay low."

Max moved to stop him, but Lucas had already started creeping toward a kiosk for shelter.

Billy, meanwhile, ducked out of the way just as his clone swung a deadly arm toward his face. "Easy, asshole – that's my money-maker," he grumbled. Dodging to the left, he boxed the doppelganger right in the chin, but it barely reacted. Or at least, it hadn't until it spotted a *new* target.

Instantly, Max seemed to realize its point of interest. "Lucas!" she cried.

Billy felt his heart plummet. Shit, shit, shit, *shit!*

Making a mad dash for his sister's husband, he felt his lungs squeeze

as a tentacle swung over his shoulder.

"Not today, *asshole*." Diving forward, Billy shoved Lucas aside just as the tentacle made its mark. With a howl of pain, Billy gritted his teeth and stumbled, wheezing as the slithering appendage dug painfully into his side.

"Billy!" Max screamed.

That was enough to garner Eleven's attention. With a cry of her own, she furiously shoved her doppelganger aside and held out her hands. Now squeezing them into fists, she screamed and yanked her arms to the left, causing the tentacle to rip from Billy's flank and go careening through a glass window. He staggered, stunned, before collapsing to his knees.

Lucas was at his side in an instant. "Oh, shit...oh, *God*, are you okay, man?"

"Never better," Billy choked.

Sobbing, Max ran over to them with Eleven by her side. "Can you move? C-can you stand?"

Coughing, Billy shuddered and clutched at his bleeding wound. "I'd rather *not*, but seeing just where we are, it doesn't look like I have much choice in the matter."

Genuflecting before him, Eleven held out her hand for him to take. "Do you trust me?"

Billy trembled, meeting her tear-filled gaze with an unspoken *always*. "Yeah," he whispered. "Yeah, I trust you."

Smiling, she clasped his hand, and then he rose alongside her on unsteady limbs.

"Feel me in your heart," she encouraged.

For a moment, Billy was confused. But once their fingers twined together, he drew a sharp breath and closed his eyes, nearly sagging against her due to the overwhelming wave of energy. Blood began to

ooze from his nose, ears and eyes like tears, and when he looked over at Eleven, he realized she was screaming.

All at once, their two doppelgangers froze up in shock, then began to twitch and spasm in agony.

Billy's jaw clenched and he bellowed a hoarse yell. The blood in his eyes temporarily blinded him, but the clones melting and collapsing were unmistakable.

Max drew a breath. With tears sparkling on her cheeks, she rushed over and took hold of Billy's hand, who instantly transferred a stunning wave of energy to her through their palms. In the distance, she could see her own doppelganger beginning to twitch and writhe.

One by one, the others rushed over to join them in a line of linked hands.

Eleven swayed unsteadily, her eyes closing as blood oozed down into her gasping mouth. Her heart stuttered in her chest, and then with a feeble cry, she expelled her remaining strength throughout the group. The ripple effect caused them all to jolt in shock.

A loud, inhuman roar pierced throughout the dilapidated building, and then the clones exploded, leaving behind tiny mindflayer bits that flowed over the tile. They squirmed angrily, sizzled, and then promptly vanished into an amorphous puff of smoke.

The exhausted group collapsed to their knees, only being held upright by their joined hands.

"Jeeeesus," Steve swore. "I think I just pulled every muscle in my body."

"So much for being a gym teacher," Dustin wheezed.

Ignoring them, Billy crawled over to Eleven and lifted her up into his arms, tasting bile as he patted her face. "Hey," he cajoled, "hey, c'mon... Don't you let go, you hear me?"

She stirred, her brow pinching before she opened her eyes to blearily peer up at him. All at once, her lips split into a bright smile. "Did we

win?"

Billy chuckled, nodding with relief as he cupped her face. "Yeah, baby, we won. I'm gonna have a gnarly scar, but I'm okay with adding this one to the list."

Wrapping her arms weakly around his neck, Eleven sagged into his embrace and beamed. She felt safe and warm, and as his hand wove through her hair, she knew she was exactly where she needed to be.

After the destruction of the mindflayer, the natural order had once more been restored. Will and the others had awoken, and following a deep inspection by the group, were all determined to be safe and unflayed. Miraculously, Billy had been the only one who'd been injured that day.

So now, sullenly sitting on Eleven's bed, he waited for her to continue with their latest healing regimen.

"Hold still," she admonished. "I have to change your bandages, so if you could just quit *squirming*..."

"I'm squirming because it hurts!" he complained. "Don't you know the meaning of restraint?"

"Yes, but it's never seemed to bother you before." Sparing him a wry smile, Eleven coaxed him into sitting still as she began peeling the old, yellowed bandages from his side. "It looks a little better today, at least...you really look like you're healing."

As she swabbed the wound with rubbing alcohol, Billy furiously jerked with a sharp, "OW! Jesus, that fucking *hurts!*"

Apologetically, she kissed a mottled bruise on his shoulder. "I promise it'll feel better soon."

"Hmph. Yeah, right."

Applying the fresh bandages, Eleven smiled at him before leaning down to press a soft kiss over his covered side.

He blinked. "W-what are you doing?"

"Making it feel better. Didn't anyone ever tell you that kisses ease every sting?" Smile fading a moment – no, she realized, it was doubtful that he *had* ever learned such a thing – she straightened again and shrugged. Though to her surprise, Billy seemed willing to play along.

"You missed a spot," he said, pointing to a scratch on his collarbone.

Brightening again, Eleven stooped down and dutifully kissed the swollen area, her lips lingering a bit longer than was necessary. He touched her face, and then she lifted her head again, smiling shyly.

With a slight sneer, Billy raised his hand and tapped his bottom lip. "Missed a spot."

Grinning, Eleven gave him a gentle shove. "Billy, I've seen that movie..."

"*What* movie? This is a completely original pick-up line." Smile faltering a moment, he added, "You know, uh...I've been thinking about what I'm going to do."

Eleven's heart leapt into her throat. "Oh?"

"Yeah..." Reaching down, he took her smaller hands in his. "I want you to come with me to California...to the beach we shared."

Eleven blinked up at him in shock, then an effulgent smile spread across her lips. "Really?"

He nodded. "Yeah."

Fighting back tears, she lifted her hands and cupped his face. "I'd go anywhere with you," she fondly agreed, "but there's just one problem..."

Billy looked down at her, uneasy. "And what's that?"

"I've never really learned how to swim...not beyond floating." Face coloring with shame, she bit her lip. "Papa put me in water

sometimes...to strengthen my powers. It's why I shower instead of getting baths."

Billy paled. "Oh...shit, El, I-I didn't-"

"No," she cut in. "I *want* to go with you. I *need* to make an ugly memory beautiful."

"Yeah, but-"

"You make everything beautiful." Beaming, her smile grew decidedly sly. "By the way, I hope you didn't think I'd forgotten you needed another kiss."

He chuckled. "I dunno, El, I'm pretty banged up here...I might need a *lot* more than just one measly kiss."

"Billy, the last time we tried that, you ripped your stitches..."

"Then let's rip 'em again, yeah? I don't mind having a scar half-caused by sex."

"Ugh, you *wouldn't*, would you?" Eyes gleaming, she absently thumbed the corner of his bandages. "Will you let me be on top? Uh...for safety reasons?"

Ducking down to meet her gaze, Billy grinned and brushed his mouth over the corner of her lips, relishing in how she tensed up and stopped breathing. "Yeah," he lowly agreed. "You've been awfully *good* this week, so maybe just this once."

That was all the provocation she needed. Urging her mouth into his, Eleven hummed in triumph before shoving him against the bed with her powers.

"Jesus," Billy swore, wincing, "I was only *joking* about the sex scars, you know!"

"Sorry, sorry!" Giggling, Eleven crawled over top of him and pressed her mouth to his, sighing sweetly as he encouraged her to grind down into his lap.

That was when the door opened. Jolting upright, Eleven clenched her fists and furiously looked over at her roommate, who had returned home the night before. "Trisha, *seriously?* Didn't we agree on a *knocking* policy?"

"Oh...um..." The blonde blinked, looking between her friend and Billy (especially Billy) with interest. "I was just...I-I wanted to know if you've seen my-?"

Eleven jerked her arm and slammed the door in her face. With an aggravated sigh, she looked down at Billy and shrugged. "So, how soon can we go to California?"

Seagulls circled in lazy arcs overhead, laughing gaily as the waves lapped at the pristine sand. Eleven stood in front of the ocean, holding her arms out and inhaling the salty air with a warm, satisfied little smile. This was what Billy loved – *this* was what he called home.

After only two days, her skin had already turned a golden brown (she'd refused to leave the beach), and her arms and legs were covered in flecks of sand due to lounging about.

Billy came up behind her with two ice cream cones. He smiled as he watched her hum and sway, feeling a fond ache in his chest. It was almost like experiencing his love for the ocean all over again, seeing how openly delighted she became anytime her feet touched the sand. She looked at him over her shoulder then, and his breath caught in his lungs. She was...

"Hi." Eyes sparkling with fondness, Eleven bounded over him to him and took a cone from his hand. "I was beginning to think you were lost."

"I wasn't that long," Billy insisted. "I got caught up haggling with some vendor over a surfboard. I'm gonna go back and buy it later."

He flashed her a boyish smile then, his warmth dazzling her as she was instantly reminded of his ebullient, sunny smiles with his mother.

You were happy... Was he finally happy again here, and with *her*?

"You gonna eat that? It's starting to melt..."

"Oh!" Flustered, Eleven's cheeks flushed pink and she turned her attention to the ice cream, licking at the melting sides as Billy chuckled. "It's *not* funny."

"It's *kind* of funny." Smiling, he headed over to the surf and stopped along the water's edge, his lashes lowering at the comforting, all too familiar rush of cold water over his feet. Eleven joined him then and he looked down at her, feeling his pulse jump when she laid her head on his shoulder.

Even after all this time, his old aversion to touch *still* tried to resurface, but he'd developed a contradictory craving for tenderness. Or more specifically, *her* tenderness. She'd had to wheedle and plead with him to come down to the beach without a shirt, but now here he was, hopelessly bare with the sun beating down on the ugliest parts of him... But Eleven didn't seem to think they were ugly.

As they stood side-by-side eating ice cream, Eleven fondly traced her fingers along his flank scar – the first one he'd received from the mindflayer, and arguably his most grotesque. He squirmed self-consciously, but when she pressed a placating kiss to his shoulder, his posture softened and he leaned into her touch.

"So, uh..." He hesitated, swallowing his ice cream with visible difficulty. "How long did...? H-how long do you plan on staying?"

Eleven lifted her head and regarded him solemnly. "Billy..."

"No, no, you don't have to answer now, I was just wondering if-"

"I *want* to be here," she reminded him. "I plan on staying for as long as you need me."

Billy felt a lurch in his chest. In his mind's eye, he could see himself curled up on the floor with his telephone, pleading with his mom to just stay – to just *love* him enough not to leave. And yet Eleven... He didn't have to plead with her at all. The guarded part of his heart didn't trust this by instinct, but the way she looked up at him, and the

way she curled her hand into his suggested truth and love in ways he'd never before experienced.

"You'll stay?"

She nodded, her eyes sparkling with unshed tears. There was no place else she'd rather be.

Overcome, Billy leaned down and claimed her mouth in a soft, fervent kiss. She dropped her cone and curled her hand into his hair, anchoring him against her lips as their kiss grew more demanding.

The waves crashed and rolled in time to his beating heart, and whenever the surf splashed against their knees, Eleven broke the kiss with a delighted laugh. He mirrored her grin – hell, *he* laughed too, his eyes crinkling warmly as his mirth flowed through his veins like a heady shot of liquor.

This was what it meant to be alive, he realized. This was what it was like to feel, to taste, to *hope*, and with this laughing young woman in his arms, he finally realized that California wasn't his home – *she* was.

Pressing a kiss to her forehead, Billy wrapped his arms around Eleven's shoulders and held her there, not entirely willing to let go. For *years* he'd denied himself tactile comfort, but he refused to do it any longer. Not when it felt *so good* to finally be seen and heard by someone who loved him.

"Billy?"

"Hmm?"

"Let's go get that surfboard."

With a grin, he curled his arm around her and began steering her toward the boardwalk, the sun melting amidst the horizon like liquid gold. He didn't believe in a perfect life – *God*, his was the *farthest* from perfection – but with Eleven's hand tucked fondly into his, and his heart so warm and full, it felt damn near close.

A/N: THIS WAS SO HARD TO WRITE (hence my disappearing for a week or two). I'd known all along that I wanted a type of "true love"

thing where they defeated the mindflayer together, and I *also* knew I wanted Billy to save Lucas. Their scenes in S2 truly hurt me/were what made me dislike Billy the most, so I wanted him to make amends and prove to Max that he *does* accept who she loves, and by proxy, cares for him too. I also wanted this to go full-circle back to the ending of "Par for the Course" (them sharing ice cream/feeling comfortable and relaxed together/etc.), so I THINK I mostly achieved what I was going for. And it was cheesy af, so there's that. :P Though that's probably thanks to me listening to "I Won't Jump" by Maldito and "Fortress" by Bear's Den on a constant loop. ALL MY FEELS.

OH, also, the movie Eleven accused Billy of copying was *Indiana Jones*. Ironically, that scene used to gross me out as a kid, and yet I used it as inspiration for a fic. Who woulda thunkit? :P

Anyway, I think I've exhausted my plot bunnies for these two for the time being, so I'll be trying to finish my other ST story (Billy/Nancy). I'm about to make Billy flayed, which I think will be interesting, because I would've loved to have seen someone actually *fighting* for him in S3. Though it's kind of funny that that fic has taken such a drastic turn, because it started off mostly as a fun little comedy. Anyway, I hope you all enjoyed this! :) I really enjoyed writing it! Thank you so much for reading!

INDIVIDUAL THANKS:

Kara: ME TOO, especially since it took me so dang long to get them to this point. xD But gosh, thank you, I'm so happy you think so! I agonized over their love scene, because I wanted it to be perfect...which is naturally impossible, but I still tried anyway lol. Thanks so much for reading this entire time! I appreciate it!

Shian1998: Thank you! :) It's exhausting writing such an emotionally stunted character, cuz it's like BOY, CAN YOU LET DOWN YOUR WALLS YET? lol And fortunately, I can finally say that he has, so that made things flow much easier in this chapter. But yep, everyone's safe! I'll admit I was tempted to kill off Billy or El, or someone else, but then I was like AM I CRAZY? S3 BROUGHT ENOUGH HEARTACHE, THERE IS NO WAY I'M NOT GIVING EVERYONE A HAPPY ENDING. So yeah, I had to go with that. :P Thanks so much for reading this entire time! I appreciate it!

madscientistproduction.01: LOL Steve is one of my faves too, and I'm really glad I brought him in since I enjoyed making him a big brother to El. :) And he was comic relief here, which I needed lol. Thanks so much for reading!

casedeputy: Thank you very much, I'm so glad you've enjoyed! :) I really hope the ending lived up to any expectations! And I love your cute little puppy icon. ;^;